RANGELAND ROMANCES

MAR.

15¢

WHO'LL TAME THE CARNIVAL SIREN?
by ROBERT TURNER

THE ANGEL AND THE OUTLAW
by ART LAWSON

MARIAN O'HEARN
AND OTHERS

RANGELAND ROMANCES

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AND
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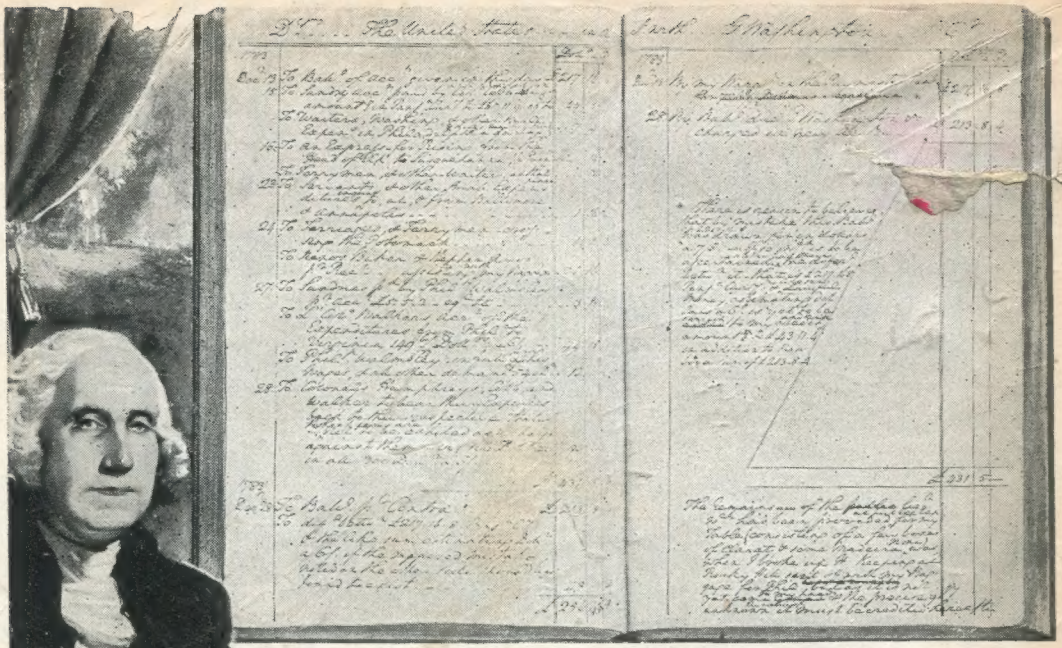
HEARN



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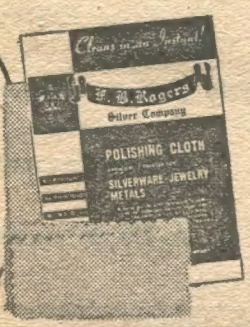

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April Issue Will Be Published February 28th

Volume Thirty | March, 1945 | Number Two

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SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC

THIS was Tavie Duncan's night. Her moonlighted midnight ride was her last gesture of freedom. Tavie's life had always been well directed—as would the life of a rangeland princess. Every move of hers had been well planned for her . . . even her marriage to Hobe Flick this coming Saturday.

But now Tavie wanted to be alone. A feeling of freedom had suddenly surged through her back at the Bar X ranch house. She had quietly saddled her chestnut mare and had drifted into the night. There was no direction in her ride. Tavie wanted it that way.

Close to the edge of the woods that crowded down to the road, Tavie stopped her horse, lifted her face full to the moonlight. Closing her eyes, she listened to the noises of the night.

Softly carried on the night wind, *another* sound came to her now. At first, it seemed to be the sweet lilting call of some strange bird. But the high, tremulous notes fitted the regular pattern of a plaintive song. It was the music of a violin. The muted strings sang of loneliness. But there were freedom in the song too.

Following the sound, Tavie moved her mare forward beneath towering trees. In the tiny clearing at the road's edge, she saw the wagon. A man sat on the edge of the platform, violin under his chin, his eyes closed. A tattered canvas banner proclaimed: *Johnny Strings—General Store.*

Tavie swung down silently, attracted by the music and by the mystery of a man who would sit alone at midnight and play a song of dreams. Hardly conscious of her own movement, she went forward, irresistibly drawn by the song.

The moonlight etched the man's chin against the darkness, made clear the red of his hair.

Tavie's foot kicked against a stone, sent it skittering into the brush. The music broke off abruptly, unfinished, left a high sweet note hanging in the stillness.

"Don't stop," she said softly.

But he put down his fiddle. He got up, staring at her, tracing the moonlight's pattern on her hair as she stood there, held motionless by the trance of the music's echo. As he turned his head, his deep brown eyes revealed a bewilderment, as though he wondered whether his music had coaxed some beautiful creature from the darkness of the woods.

Effortlessly, he lowered himself to the ground, crossed to her. He reached out one hand and touched her shoulder experimentally. When his fingers stopped against the softness of her shoulder, he asked: "Who are you?"

"It—doesn't matter."

They stood looking at each other a tiny moment, the music yet with them even though his violin was stilled. His arms moved up, took her into them. Slowly, he drew her to him. His lips came down on hers.

The remembered music rose again, played from the taut strings of Tavie's heart. She didn't fight against him. She didn't move away. It was so natural, so real, so much a part of the beauty of this night that was hers that it never occurred to her to resist. She clung to him because she wanted to be there in his arms with his lips upon hers.

Finally, he moved his head, but he kept his arms around her. "Who are you?" he asked.

Tavie stumbled back a step. Now that the immediate spell of the music had been broken—she thought of Hobe . . . the man she was going to marry.

Strangely, she wasn't ashamed of having this stranger kiss her. But this was all, of course. There could be nothing but this night, this night she would remember for always as part of a beautiful dream.

She turned and walked back to the mare.

Johnny followed her quickly, took her arm. "You can't go now. When am I to see you again?"

Tavie looked directly at him. "Never," she whispered. . . .

The tumultuous romance of Tavie and Johnny will be told in the next issue by Bill Severn in his novelette—"Cupid Brands A Sassy Rebel." And Marian O'Hearn will tell of a merry heart mixup in her novel—"Never Kiss a Two-Gun Romeo!" Also novelettes and short stories by Thelma Knoles, Lorraine Cox and others in April RANGELAND ROMANCES—published February 28th.

The Editor.

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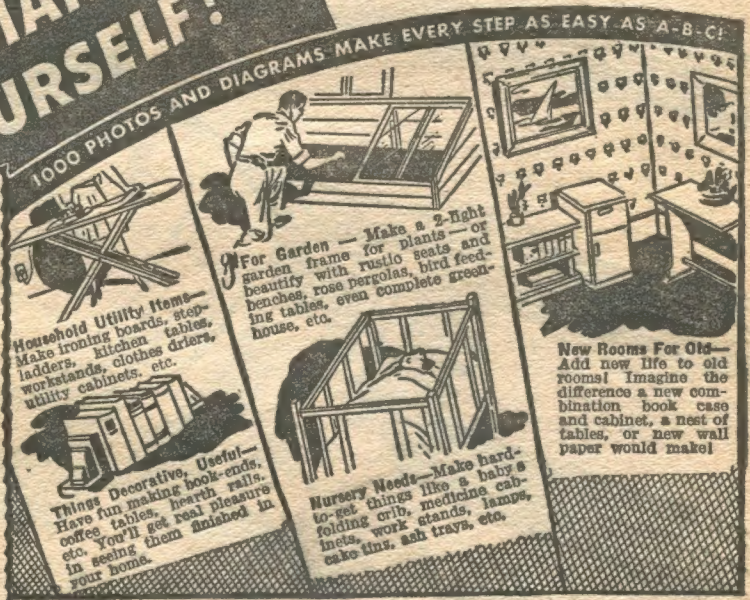

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WHO'LL TAME THE

By Robert Turner

Little Bess Thatcher, boss of the big Tumbling X, got so mad at her girl-shy foreman that she let herself get hooked into a wrestling match with Titia the Terrible, the flame-haired, lush Amazon of the tent shows.

CHAPTER ONE

Titia the Terrible

THE carnival spread itself out in a colorful sprawl of tents and dazzling torch and oil lights just outside the little cowtown of Redmud Flats. The clear

CARNIVAL SIREN?

Rollicking Novel of Gay Western Love

"Let me at her!" Bess cried.

night air rang with the whooping and laughter of oldsters and kids and pay-happy cowpokes. Above the crowd sounds was the gay, tincanny tempo of a calliope.

The very atmosphere seemed to sizzle and spark with the happy, festive mood of cowboys in their best clothes and the girls in their bright, colored silks and calicos.

Strolling along the midway, past busy games of chance and bawling sideshow barkers, Bess Thatcher kept a pert, but slightly frozen smile on her lovely heart-shaped face. Bess should have been completely and deliriously happy this night, but she wasn't. Sole owner of the huge and successful Tumbling X Ranch, and accompanied by handsome, six-feet-two Hank Randall, Bess seemed to have everything in the world that a girl could want.

But in spite of the contagious excitement and gayety of the carnival crowds, which she had caught to some extent, Bess' heart was leaden. She had thought that this would be the night of nights. She had thought that when Hank saw her in her new, brightly beaded buckskin skirt with its fringed hem just brushing dimpled knees, and the flame-red, silk blouse, he would realize that she really was a woman —and a darned attractive one, at that.

Bess had thought that at last Hank would forget that he was the Tumbling X's ramrod—and that she was his boss. She realized that he had never seen her in anything but work clothes, dressed practically the same as the men. That was not much inducement for a cowboy to get romantic about a girl.

But earlier tonight, just before they left the ranch, when Hank saw her for the first time, dressed up, he had scarcely looked at her. He hadn't stared at her long black wavy hair, thick and richly shining under her white Stetson. His gaze hadn't even dropped to the white, beautifully stitched boots that nestled so snugly around her shapely calves. He had acted just as though she was a piece of bunkhouse furniture.

Hank had just sort of turned his head away, embarrassed, after that first cursory glance and said in a flat, matter-of-fact voice: "See you're all set to go, Miss Thatcher. Reckon we'd best get started, try to get there before the carnival gets too crowded."

"Sure," Bess had told him. And as they walked out of the ranch house, across the starlit yard, to the buckboard, she had hooked her arm into his, said, softly: "Look, Hank, this is after hours. We're going to be just a couple of kids, tonight, out for a big time. I wish you'd forget that Miss Thatcher stuff. My name's Bess, you know."

"I know," Hank had answered hesitantly. She had felt the hard muscles of his arm tighten against hers and he had stumbled awkwardly over a stone in the yard. "I'll be right glad to do that. Miss Thatch—uh—Bess."

There had been an awkward silence then until they climbed up onto the buckboard and started the four-mile ride into town.

But the night was soft and full of warm, range-scented breezes. Overhead the sky was a vast arch of velvet-like blue and the stars looked like someone had spilled a bucketfull of sparkling diamonds up there. Under the spell of the rich darkness, Bess had inched along the seat of the buckboard until she was up close to Hank.

"It's beautiful out here on the range, at night, isn't it, Hank? It's so romantic, it makes me feel all kind of—well—warm and happy inside."

She had turned her face up to him, then, her moist red lips slightly parted, with the shine of the moon on her long lashes and in the deep, liquid brown of her eyes. She was the perfect picture of a girl just begging to be kissed. Everything was right—the time, the place, the opportunity. All Hank had to do was drop the reins and give the horses their heads and turn and take Bess into his arms.

But he hadn't done that. He had just sat there, stiff and straight, his lean, handsome face stern and set in the shadowed darkness. His hands had gripped the reins suddenly until his knuckles were white.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hank had finally said tightly, through compressed lips. "It's a right pretty evenin'."

Bess had waited a few moments, but slowly the hot little spitfire temper for which she was famous, flared up. What was the matter with the damned good looking, lanky rannyhan, anyhow? What was the matter with *herself*, that he wouldn't even look at her, wouldn't even hold her hand? She couldn't understand it. It bewildered and puzzled her. It made her mad. And

when tiny Bess Thatcher got mad, things happened.

Suddenly Bess stood up, a slim five-feet-even bundle of feminine rage, dark eyes flashing, square little white teeth showing between drawn back lips.

"Get up out of that seat, Hank Randall," she stormed. "I'm goin' to drive this here buckboard. A gal's got to do *something!*"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hank had gulped.

He stood up, too, and Bess pushed furiously past him, sat down hard in his place, took the reins in her hands, shook them. "Giddap, you lazy, pokey critters!" she cried. "Giddap!"

FOR the next mile, Bess drove the horses hard and the little buckboard bounced over the rough and bumpy range road like a crazy thing. Poor Hank slid back and forth along the seat, clinging on for dear life. Several times the wagon almost overturned, but Bess never slowed.

Hank shouted: "What's the all-fired hurry, anyhow? Maybe you'd best slow down a mite, Miss Thatcher—I mean—Bess. It's kind o' dangerous to ride a wagon at this speed in the dark."

"Sure, it's dangerous!" she'd shouted back. "I *like* danger. I'm not an old stick-in-the-mud like some people I could name. I want to get to town as quick as I can before I get bored to tears!"

So, grimly she had sat there consumed with frustration and anger and the buckboard rumbled on through the night at breakneck speed. And poor Hank wondered what it was all about.

Just before they reached town some of the anger started to flow out of Bess. She let the horses slow down, and again switched seats with Hank. A little ashamed now of her outburst of temper, she tried to laugh things off and chattered gayly about the fun they were going to have.

Hank Randall tried, rather bewilderedly, to catch this new happy mood, to join in with her. But he didn't quite make it.

When they reached the carnival Bess became infused with the colorful excitement of the place. She saw other cowboys with their arms around their best girls. For a few minutes she had hopes that Hank, under the spell of the carnival, would loosen up and make love to her.

But he never even took her arm as they pushed through the crowds. He did buy her candy and won her a rag doll. But he was awkward and stiff about it. Bess was one big ache of disappointment and madder than a cornered hornet.

A few moments later, strolling along the midway, Bess noticed that frequently people stared at her and Hank and sometimes nudged one another and grinned in amusement. For the first time she realized that they did make an odd, though attractive, couple—what with Hank so tall and lanky and she such a tiny halfpint.

Several times she looked up to see how Hank was taking the attention they caused. She saw him glaring angrily at a fat freighter who was staring at them.

She yanked at his arm, started toward a big tent near the end of the midway. "Let's go in here!"

Over the entrance to the tent was a big banner. On one side was the picture of a woman in spangled tights. She was standing with both arms raised to shoulder level and crooked at the elbows. She had tremendous shoulders and bulging, muscular biceps. In the picture, she was about ten-feet tall and built proportionately—a veritable giant of a woman.

The fancy, foot-high lettering of the banner proclaimed:

COME IN AND SEE TITIA THE TERRIBLE—A REDHEADED AMAZON—THE STRONGEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD AND CHAMPION CHINESE WRESTLER OF AMERICA—SEE HER LIFT 500 POUND WEIGHTS—SEE HER CHALLENGE ANY MAN IN THE AUDIENCE—COME ONE COME ALL—SHE'S AS BEAUTIFUL AS SHE IS POWERFUL!

Hank caught up with Bess, tried to take her arm and stop her as she neared the tent. "Aw, wait a minute, Bess," he pleaded. "You don't want to go in there, That kind of a show ain't for a woman like you. Let's go someplace else."

But Bess insisted that she wanted to see Titia The Terrible. They argued back and forth for awhile. Finally, Bess, who didn't really care a bit about seeing the strong woman but was angry enough by all that had happened to be obstinate and perverse about it, said:

"I'm going in, Hank Randall. You can come with me, if you want to or stay out.

I don't care. That definitely settles it."

With that, she yanked away from his restraining hand and rushed through the entrance to the tent. Meekly, miserably self conscious, with his ears and neck blazing red, Hank stumbled along behind her.

Inside, the tent was packed with men and a few older woman and some children scattered among the audience. The lights were bright in here and the air thick with smoke. Up on a small platform at the front of the tent, Titia the Terrible was just in the act of flinging a husky young cowboy flying over her shoulder, with one hand. The crowd was roaring and bellowing its delight.

The battered and mortified cowpoke climbed dizzily to his feet, brushed himself off.

Titia grinned at him, said good-naturedly: "Sorry, pard, but hereafter you'd better stick to hoss-wrangling and leave Chinese wrassling to us weaker sex!"

Bess Thatcher saw now, as they walked down a narrow aisle between benches, that Titia was not so terrible to look at. Titia had long, red hair like orange fire. Her face was apple-cheeked and beautiful, with full, soft lips and a small nose, with a sprinkling of freckles across it. Her eyes were very large and green as emeralds behind a thick fringe of lashes and under the delicately winged brows.

Titia was not ten feet tall at all. She was just about six. Nor were her arms and legs heavily muscled. Under the tight-fitting costume of spangles she was beautifully curved and proportioned, a gorgeous figure of a woman. And all male eyes in the tent gazed at Titia with more than just admiration for her strength and prowess at Chinese wrestling.

CHAPTER TWO

Halfpint Hurricane

BESS and Hank finally found two seats, up near the front, right on the aisle. Behind them was a middle-aged homesteader and a scrubby-headed, impish-faced boy of about ten years old. As Bess and Hank moved to their seats, the kid said in a loud and squeaky voice:

"Hey, Pop, look at the little halfpint gal what just came in! I'll bet Titia, up there, could toss her to hell-and-gone!"

"Hush up!" his father commanded, "'fore I warm your britches!"

Bess Thatcher felt a flood of temper heat up her veins. Even though she could match her beauty against any woman's, she was sensitive about her diminutive size. Both she and Hank turned and glowered at the boy, who only stuck out his tongue at them.

They turned back to watch the show just as a barker came out and put his arm around Titia and started his ballyhoo.

"Lad-ees and gennelmun!" he hollered. "Is there anyone else in the audience who thinks they can stand up against the strength and skill of Titia the Terrible? There's twen-tee five sil-vuh dollars waiting for the man, woman or child who can defeat her! Come on, boys, step right up! Maybe you'll be lucky. It doesn't cost you a single peso if yuh get whupped, so what have you got to lose?"

By this time the cowboy whom Titia had thrown, came limping up the aisle to his seat. There was a big bruise on his jaw and a lump on his forehead, where he had landed. Seeing him, none of the other men seemed anxious to suffer the same fate. Especially when they heard the catcalls and the ridicule being hurled at the poor waddie who had been beaten by a woman.

In desperation, the barked spieled again: "Come on you men—*anybody!* What are you, men or mice? Are you afraid of a mere woman? Are you going to let this beautiful redheaded Amazon shame you all, show you up? I thought you Westerners are supposed to be tough. I thought—"

The barked never finished his spiel. At that point the youngster sitting directly behind Bess jabbed her with a pin. With a shrill squeal of dismay, Bess leaped up like a suddenly released jack-in-the-box. For a moment she didn't realize exactly what had happened. Then, before she could wheel and bat the fresh kid, she heard the barker yell:

"Well, well, what have we here, lad-ees and gennelmun? There's a little lassie with lots of courage. I knew *someone* would take up Titia's challenge." His voice was mocking, half laughing. He knew that Bess had jumped up for some altogether different reason. But his intuition for showmanship asserted itself. Here was an inci-

dent that should be good for a lot of laughs.

"It looks," he went on, "as though we're going to have a feminine David and Goliath battle. Will the lovely little lady in the white hat step right up on the platform? I'm sure Titia will be glad to oblige her!"

Bess looked around her helplessly. All she saw was a sea of laughing faces, staring up at her. From the back, several drunken cowboys guffawed. Bess felt as though her cheeks were on fire.

Finally, she glanced down at Hank Randall. Hank's big fists were twisting in his lap. His face was flaming, too. He squirmed in his seat and looked as though he wished the floor would open up and swallow him.

Suddenly, unreasonably, Bess decided that it was Hank's fault that this had happened, that she was being subjected to this embarrassing incident. If he hadn't been such an oaf all evening, if he hadn't gotten her so riled up, she never would have insisted on coming into this place. Anger swept over her in hot waves.

Indistinctly, Bess heard the barker say, with laughing sarcasm: "Of course, if the little lady is *afraid,* doesn't want to get her pretty cowgirl outfit messed up—"

Titia broke in then. "Cut it out, Gus," she said. "Enough is enough. You know damned well I can't Chinese wrassle any tiny little thing like that. I might forget my own strength and chuck her right through the top of the tent. Why don't you stop it and give the gal a break? You're makin' her feel mighty uncomfortable."

That was all Bess needed. She yelled: "Is that so, Ma'am? Well, I'll be right glad to challenge you to Chinese or any other brand of wrassling!"

Suddenly the crowd was silent, except for a few whistles and the sharp intake of breaths. They sat, spellbound, staring at little Bess, wondering if they had heard correctly.

HANK RANDALL jumped out of his seat as though someone had jabbed him with a hot branding iron. "Please, Bess," he whispered. "You don't know what you're saying. You can't fight that big hippopotamous. She'll kill you! Come on, let's get out of here."

She wrenched her arm away. Hank's objection was the last straw. She stepped into the aisle, strode toward the platform. As she reached it, started to climb up, the slim, greasy-haired barker came over, an expression of alarm on his bony face.

"Look, sis," he whispered. "I was on'y kiddin'. Go on back to your seat. It was all a gag, see? Titia don't want to wrassle a little dame like you. You saw what she did to that last cowboy. Titia don't even know her own strength. You beat it—"

Bess Thatcher put the tips of her fingers against the barker's chest, gave him a stiff shove that sent him reeling backwards.

"Listen," she cried, "I can throw a steer as good as any man. I guess I can do the same for that female elephant you got there!"

Hank came bumbling down the aisle at that point, once more tried to plead with Bess to change her mind. She wheeled, gave him a backward shove, too, and climbed up onto the platform, walked over to Titia the Terrible.

The whole audience was now completely taken up with the idea of a battle between the two girls. Feet were stamping all over the place. The whole tent rang with cries of encouragement to both girls. Then laughter rocked the place as the two women faced each other, close together and the contrast in their sizes became even more ridiculously evident. Titia fairly towered above the smaller, younger girl.

"Look, kid," she said, "you don't want to get hurt, get that nice outfit all messed up. It's still not too late to run back to your seat and forget the whole thing. Gus there, can talk his way out of it. Why don't you be a good little girl and do that?"

Bess's little fists clenched hard against her thighs. Her whole body was a-tremble with mortification and anger. "You offered twenty five dollars to anyone who can throw you," she snapped. "I aim to get that money, now, and show you that size and muscles don't mean a thing. Let's square off!"

By this time, Gus, the barker, had come over to them. In a resigned voice, he said: "Okay, sister, it's your funeral. Just don't try and sue us for hospital expenses."

Bess was in a daze the next few minutes as Gus took both girls to the center of the platform. The place was one solid roar of

sound as he set the two women facing each other, each with her right foot set out in front of her. Then he instructed them to place their right foot side by side, touching, and to clasp their right hands directly over their touching feet.

Over the yowling of the crowd, Gus said: "Now, when I count three, the idea is for you both to start pushing or pulling or twisting, whatever you wish—and without moving either foot, and using only your clasped right hand, to throw the other one off balance."

In a daze, Bess heard Gus begin to count. She half turned her head, looked out over the blur of faces in the audience. But she couldn't seem to pick Hank out. *I'll bet the big lummox is so embarrassed, he's walked out on me!* she told herself. *I don't care if this woman does half kill me. Maybe Hank will feel sorry for me, then, maybe he'll give me a little attention, then.*

Bess became aware of Titia's big hand tightening its grip on hers. She looked up and saw the grin on the big woman's handsome face, and it was like a fuse setting off a charge of dynamite in Bess' brain. She go so mad she hurt all over.

The very second Gus said the number, "Three!" Bess bent way forward on her extended right leg, as far as she could go, pushed Titia's arm way back so that she was put completely off balance. A split second later, she jerked back in the other direction, twisted her own left and pulled Titia abruptly forward. All this was done with an almost savage intensity and quickness. Bess was working like a bulldogger, using Titia's greater weight to her own advantage.

The strong woman was thrown completely off balance. Titia suddenly found herself being yanked forward and up against Bess's braced and twisted figure. Before either of them hardly knew what was going on Titia was flying over Bess' back in a perfect jiu-jitsu throw.

Titia did a complete somersault in the air, landed on her back with a thump that shook the whole platform and knocked all the breath out of her.

The audience roared its delight while Bess stood dumbfounded and shaken, with all temper suddenly gone from her. She half turned and looked at her fallen opponent trying to pick herself up off the floor. Gus came over to Bess, then. He looked as sick as if it had been he who had been thrown. Silently, he handed Bess a leather pouch that clinked loudly with the twenty-five silver dollars it held.

Bess stared down at the pouch for a moment as though she didn't realize what it was all about. Then, suddenly she turned and flung the little sack of money at Titia's feet.

"I don't want your dinero," she said. "Go buy yourself some more muscles!"

BESS leaped off the platform, raced up the aisle toward the exit as fast as her slim legs would carry her. Men along the aisle reached out to stop her to shake her hand. But she brushed them aside, rushed on. She didn't even hear the thunderous cheers.

Outside she stumbled through the midway crowds and around to the empty darkness behind one of the sideshow tents. There she collapsed on a little pile of tent poles and cried to her hearts content. Her shoulders, her whole slender little body shook with sobs.

In a few minutes someone was standing beside her. Hands gripped her under the arms, pulled her to her feet. A soft, sympathetic male voice said: "There, there, Bess, please don't carry on like that. Everything's all right."

Through her tears, Hank Randall's handsome face swam in a blur. With a soft little sigh, she flung herself into his arms. She felt his arms go tight around her, felt herself suddenly crushed against him. She buried her face against his chest.

The next thing Bess knew, Hank's mouth was brushing her hair, and her white Stetson fell to the ground. She could feel his heart pounding against hers. She could smell tobacco on him and the clean scent of a man's soap. She heard Hank murmur:

"You were wonderful, honey!"

"But—but you didn't even stay to see what happened," she blurted, tearfully. "I looked back where we were sitting and I didn't see you!"

"I was there, Bess. I stood down front by the platform. I couldn't stop you 'cause you were like a spitting wildcat. But if you'd got hurt I was going to take the whole durned place apart. And I was going

to take that barker and his Titia and use them to mop up the mess!"

Bess clung to him tightly, said: "Oh, Hank, I made such a fool of myself. I didn't mean to do anything like that, but they made me so mad. I do crazy things when I get angry, Hank—especially when someone teases me about my size."

She turned her face up toward his, then, and her eyes were jewelled with tears and her lips were slightly parted and her cheeks flushed to the color of soft red roses. It was too much for Hank. Suddenly his face dipped toward hers. Their lips touched lightly, at first, then crushed together.

The thrill of that kiss seared its way like a fire to Bess' brain. Her hands went to the back of Hank's neck, clasped there. She felt as though she was all at once being whisked away on fairy wings to float on the feathery softness of clouds. She felt as though she was dizzily whirling in space.

And then they suddenly broke apart. Hank was breathing as though he'd been running long and far. His face was white. He turned his gaze abruptly away. Words tumbled out of his mouth:

"I—I'm awfully sorry, Miss Thatcher. I don't know what got into me. I must have gone crazy all of a sudden. Please forgive me. I guess I just sort of couldn't stand to see you crying so pitiful like that and—and kind of lost my head."

Hardly before he finished talking, Hank turned on his heel and strode out toward the midway. "I'll wait for you out yonder where it's light," he called back over his shoulder.

Bess stood there in the darkness, her heart a thumping thing in her chest. His kiss was still on her lips, warm and tingling as she watched him go.

"Wait, Hank!" she called out, her voice breaking with emotion. "Come back! Hank, I don't care that you're my foreman. Just because you work for me doesn't mean a thing. I love you, Hank. Come back!"

But he was too far away. He didn't hear her. She saw his tall, well-knit figure melt into the crowds on the midway. She wanted to run after him, but she didn't have the strength, now. She just stood there, head bowed, hands clasped wretchedly in front of her. Half aloud, she said: "I'm a fool! He

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didn't take me in his arms, and kiss me because he loved me. He was just sorry for me. He said so. He said that!"

From behind her a woman's voice said softly: "Miss Thatcher, may I speak to you for a moment?"

She half turned and saw Titia the Terrible walking toward her through the gloom. The strong woman was no longer in her spangled costume. She was wearing a ruffle-trimmed print dress that softened the tallness and breadth of her figure. Her red hair was combed behind her ears and she looked very lovely and lady-like.

CHAPTER THREE

Blonde Hussy

HAT do you want?" Bess demanded sullenly. "Please go away and leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you." Bess turned away and tried vainly to pick out Hank's tall figure in the crowd.

"I just wanted to congratulate you," Titia said. "I didn't get a chance before—you ran out of the tent so fast. That was a honey of a fall you gave me. It's the first time anyone—man or woman—has ever thrown me at that sport. . . . I also wanted to thank you for giving the money to me. I'm going to need it. I'm out of a job."

Bess' Brows went up. "You're what—?" she asked. "You mean he fired you because—because I beat you?"

"Sure thing," Titia said. "It almost killed Gus to have to pay out that twenty-five dollars. He figured that if you did it, others soon would too. He figures maybe I've lost the knack, and he's not takin' any more chances of getting stuck for prize money."

Titia paused, then shrugged. "I don't care much. I was getting a little fed up with the job. You wouldn't think it to look at me, honey, but I'm really a lady at heart." A sad little catch came into her voice for a moment. "You see—all my life I wanted to be an actress. . . . And this is how my ambition wound up. So maybe you did me a favor."

Now, Bess felt kind of ashamed of her ill nature at Titia's approach. She realized what a good sport the big woman was being about the whole thing. If anybody was going to be annoyed by the incident, it should be Titia. But she was taking it in stride.

"I'm awfully sorry," Bess said. "I feel bad about this. What are you going to do, now?"

Titia held up the palms of her hands. "Hit for a big town back East and try for a job of some kind, I guess. I sort of hate to leave the West. It like it out here. A person can breathe the air here and everything is so big. But there's nothing much for me to do around these parts."

"How did you know my name?" Bess asked.

"Some of the men in the crowd were kiddin' me, as I was leaving. I heard 'em talkin' about you being the best woman rancher around here, about the big spread you run all by yourself."

Then Titia put her hand on Bess' shoulder. In the pale glow of the moon, the big woman's features softened in a smile. "All I want to tell you, now, is, honey, that I accidentally overheard your conversation with that lanky cowboy. I saw and heard the whole thing. I couldn't help it. Believe me, hon, that wasn't any sympathy kiss he gave you. The tall fellow meant that one. I think it's just that you being his boss kind of gets him. He probably has a lot of false pride, or something, thinks maybe you'll figure he's after your money and the ranch. But don't you worry. He'll get over that. You keep after him and you'll land him."

"If only I was sure that was true," Bess said. And then, suddenly, this woman's sincerity, her sympathy, got Bess. For the first time she had another woman whom she could confide in. It was something she had needed for a long time, now. She told Titia about all the things that had happened tonight, how Hank had ignored her all evening.

When she was finished, Titia told her: "What I said before, still goes. It also sounds as though maybe he's worried about the difference in your heights. But not the way you think. Hank probably believes that *you* wouldn't want *him* because he's so tall compared to you. But you'll get him straightened out on that, too, after awhile."

Grateful for this encouragement and still feeling a little responsible for Titia's being out of a job, Bess said: "Look, you're as

big and strong as any man I've ever seen. If I can do a man's job around a ranch, I don't see why you couldn't too. And I could use another hand. How would you like to hire on with me, Titia?"

For the next moment, both women stared hard at each other, their eyes searching. And they both liked what they saw. Almost simultaneously, their hands went out and clasped.

"You've got yourself a cowgirl, boss," Titia said.

"And I believe I'm going to be pleased and proud of it," Bess told her.

They walked out to the midway together, arms linked. They both laughed at the surprised expression on Hank's face, as he met them. Quickly, Bess explained what had happened. Seriously, Hank stuck out his big paw and shook with Titia.

"Glad to have you join up with us, gal," he said.

"Well," Bess said, "it's getting late, and what with all the excitement, I'm kind of tired. What do you say we all head back for home. Got to rise early tomorrow for a big day's work."

THEY made their way through the gradually thinning crowds to the buckboard. On the long ride back to the Tumbling X, Bess and Hank told Titia about the fresh little boy sticking the pin in Bess and starting the whole thing. They all laughed at the thing now. It all seemed kind of silly.

Back at the ranch, Hank went around and rounded up the boys to meet Titia. While he was doing that, Bess got a work shirt and levis and boots that had been left behind by a cowboy who had quit his job a few months ago. She gave them to Titia. When Titia had changed into those men's work clothes, she came out and pirouetted gracefully before Bess.

"You look marvelous, Titia," Bess told her. "You were made for such clothes."

It was true. The big woman's husky figure was flatteringly enhanced by the fullness of the man's shirt and the tight fitting blue levis.

"I sort of like these duds myself," Titia said happily. "I think I'm going to like being a cowgirl."

At that instant, Hank came into the main room of the ranch house followed by half a dozen hands. Apparently he had been telling them the story of the night's adventure. They were all grinning from ear to ear, from grizzled and mountainous Big George down to diminutive Shorty Thompson.

All the hands clustered around Titia and Bess and shook Titia's hand and looked her over with amazement and admiration and with some dismay at the idea of having a woman ranch hand around.

Shorty Thompson, a handsome, chubby-cheeked little chap about five-feet-two, pushed his hand through his curly blond hair and said: "Man-alive, now I've seen everything. I didn't think they made wimmin like her! I don' know as I like the idea o' her workin' this outfit. Once she learns the ropes she'll be able to run the whole ranch herself and we'll all be out of jobs."

Titia looked at Shorty's infectious grin. Before he knew what she was up to, she stepped toward Shorty, and put her hands under his arms, lifted him, kicking and protesting, off the floor as easily as if he were a child.

"Why, bless your heart, you cute, handsome little thing," she said grinning. "I wouldn't think of puttin' you out of work. As a matter of fact, I'm going to ask Bess if she'll let you break me in on the job." Titia planted a firm kiss right on Shorty's forehead. Then she set him down.

Shorty stood there, staring at her, with his mouth gaping, speechless for the first time in his life, crimson from the neck of his shirt to the curly blond roots of his hair.

By this time the other hands were roaring with laughter. They slapped Shorty on the back, poked him in the ribs and teased him.

"Shorty!" one man said. "I've allus heard you braggin' about what a devil you was with the wimmin folk, but I never believed it until now."

It was too much for poor Shorty. Suddenly he wheeled and pushed his way through the gang, ran out of the house, the jibes of the men ringing in his ears.

Then all the men started kidding Titia. She gave it right back to them, good naturedly.

Bess knew that the big woman had endeared herself to the hands already, that she

would get along all right. There would be no trouble.

The next few days were busy ones. Bess assigned Hank and Shorty to break Titia in. Titia learned the ranch work fast. It wouldn't be very many weeks, Hank told Bess, before Titia would be as valuable as any man they had working for them.

Several times during that period, Bess found opportunities to be alone with Hank. Remembering what Titia had told her, she did her best to break through Hank's pride and reserve, to let him know, without coming right out with it, just how she felt about him. But it didn't seem to work. Hank remained stiff and formal. And when in desperation, in a roundabout way, Bess reminded him of their kiss at the carnival, he just got very red and stammering some kind of excuse walked away.

AT THE end of Titia's first week at the Tumbling X, Bess went to her room, told her how things were going. "Titia," she begged, "you've got to help me, somehow! I can't stand it much longer. That big cowpoke is driving me crazy. I can't eat or sleep for thinking about him. And he doesn't even seem to know I'm alive. What am I going to do?"

Titia put her big arm around little Bess. "Wait a minute, honey," she said. "I've got an idea. Maybe if you could get the old string-bean jealous enough, he'd snap out of it. I *know* he's just as crazy about you. A woman can tell things like that."

"Jealous?" Bess said. "How can I make him that way? With whom?"

Suddenly Titia's large, pretty features grinned—then sobered just as quickly. She started to say something, then stopped. Finally she came out with it.

"I know just the man," she said, swiftly, as though she was afraid she might change her mind. "It's a natural. He's just the right size for you and he's handsome and nice. You're going to make Shorty Thompson make love to you, Bess!"

Bess gasped. Her great brown eyes widened. "Shorty!" she gasped. "Titia, I couldn't do that. Why—he means nothing to me. It wouldn't be fair to him, either. Oh, I *couldn't!*"

"Don't be silly!" Titia said. "All you have to do, is act real sweet and nice to Shorty when Hank is around. And then one day, when you know Hank is watching, corner Shorty and kiss him as though you were crazy about him. I'll bet it will work!"

Bess thought about the idea for a few minutes. She remembered a story she had once read where the heroine had done just that—and it had worked. Maybe Titia was right. If Hank really did care for her, maybe that would jolt him into doing something about it.

"It's crazy," she told Titia. "But I'm desperate. I've got to do something."

"Good girl," Titia said. There was a strange little catch in her voice as she spoke. "I hope it works out all right," she said, turned and suddenly left the room.

That night at the dinner table, Bess saw to it that she sat next to Shorty Thompson. She went out of her way to wait on him. She flirted outrageously with him all through the meal.

At first, Shorty was somewhat taken aback, but after a while he began to bask in the sudden attention of his beautiful boss. Soon they were laughing and joking back and forth in an intimate way, as though there was nobody else at the table.

Several times, Bess stole a glance at Hank Randall, to see how he was taking it. But Hank wasn't even watching. He had his face almost buried in his plate and kept busy stuffing food into his mouth. When Bess looked at Titia for encouragement, she, too, was ignoring the little tableau across the table. Titia seemed to be deeply absorbed in a serious discussion about ranch work with grizzled old Big George.

That evening, just before dark, as Bess came back from the corrals, she saw a strange horse hitched in front of the ranch house. As soon as she saw it, she ran around to the other side of the house, her fine, delicate features white with temper. She slid to a stop a few feet away from Hank Randall and a blonde young woman who were deeply engrossed in their conversation.

Bess planted her tiny feet apart, put her hands on her hips, said: "All right, Vera Kane. Git the hell off my land before I go inside and grab a shootin' iron and come out and part that bleached blonde hair of yours!"

The blonde pivoted slowly. Impudently,

her gaze went up and down Bess' slight figure. The blonde was average height. She had sharp, pretty features and a blue-eyed baby-like stare. She was dressed as Bess had been on the night of the carnival—only much more daringly. The blonde's buckskin skirt was well above her rounded knees. Her silk blouse was open deep at the throat. Her lips were painted brightly with lipstick. One corner of her mouth twisted now, in a cold, patronizing smile.

"Well," Vera Kane said, "if it isn't the wee little kewpie doll who runs the Tumbling X. For a moment I thought it was somebody's child running around loose."

With a savage little cry of rage, Bess flung herself at the blonde girl. "I told you if you ever came around here again trying to steal my best hands, I'd beat you up. Now, I'm really going to do it. Try to get my foreman, the best dam' ramrod in these parts, now, will you. I'll show you whether or not I'm just a kewpie doll, you—you painted-up hussy!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Fightin' Gal

A SECOND before Bess' tense and fighting figure leaped toward the blonde girl, Hank Randall stepped between the two women. At first he put a hand against Bess' shoulder. She tried to slip around him and get at the other woman. Hank had to reach out and grab her. It was all he could do to hold her. She was like an embattled little tigress.

"Let me at her!" Bess cried. "Don't stand here, holding me back, protecting that—that woman! Let me go, Hank! That's an order!"

But strong and wiry as she was, Bess could not break loose from Hank's grip. And he paid no attention to her pleas. All he said, was: "Take it easy, Bess, please. I'm sure Miss Kane didn't mean no harm."

"Harm!" Bess screamed. "She'd just like to ruin this spread by takin' all the good men off it. That's all the harm she means. She's stolen half a dozen of my men in the past year. Hank, just let me have one punch at that baby-doll face!"

Hank cut in, speaking to the blonde girl. "You'd better ride off this range, Miss Kane. We don't want any more trouble."

"Why it wasn't any trouble at all, Handsome," Vera Kane said sweetly. She winked broadly at Hank. She turned smartly on her heels, with an intriguing swirl of the short, buckskin skirt, walked to her pinto, mounted and rode away.

Hank waited until she was out of sight and then let Bess go. Bess had quieted some by this time. She stared angrily after the cloud of dust made by the other woman's horse, and hitched up her levis at the belt.

"The nerve of that brazen creature!" she said.

"Don't you worry none, Bess," Hank said quietly. "I like the Tumbling X. I wouldn't leave here just for a few dollars a month more."

As he turned and walked away toward the corrals, Bess thought: "Sure, you like the *Tumbling X!* That's the reason you wouldn't leave. Why couldn't you have said you wanted to stay because you liked *me,* you big donkey!"

Bess turned, then, and headed for the house, a few yards away. She saw Titia standing in the doorway, a grin on her face, her green eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Wow!" Titia said as Bess joined her. "What brought that on? You sounded as though you'd been nursing a hate for that blonde baby for a long time. Who is she, anyhow?"

"Vera Kane," Bess said. "She owns the Bar-B-Seven. I've known her all my life. She's man-crazy and unscrupulous and—"

"Another girl rancher?" Titia said, eyebrows raised.

"Her father and mine were friends—even though Vera and I never did get along ever since we were kids. Our dads were both killed, coming back from a trip to the Coast when a stage lost a wheel and went off a cliff. I've put up with her as long as I can. Next time she shows in these parts, I swear I'll shoot her down like I would a coyote."

"You sure told her off," Titia said. "And you heard what Hank said, didn't you? That proves what I've been telling you all along. The guy is loco about you."

Bess shrugged slim shoulders, pouted her pretty lips. "Yeah. It proves he loves the Tumblin X ranch, but that's all. I'm afraid I'm licked, Titia."

"Nonsense!" Titia took Bess' hand,

squeezed it encouragingly. "Bashful hombres like Hank never say what they really mean. How's the Shorty Thompson idea seem to be working out?"

"Not so good. Hank didn't even seem to notice—or to care, if he did."

"Well, you keep it up. And try the kiss, right soon. That ought to get Hank!"

Bess smiled her appreciation and went on into the house. About an hour later, Bess had the perfect opportunity to try Titia's plan. She was coming back from a trip to an outbuilding that Hank and another man had been doing some repair work on. She knew Hank would be along any minute.

She met Shorty Thompson by the corral. Bess stopped and talked to him for a few minutes. It was dark by now and there was a bright new moon riding high over the range like a fresh cut slice of peach. Stars were thick in the sky and a warm southerly breeze was soft and caressing on the skin.

Bess timed it perfectly. She waited until just a few minutes before Hank came along, then started edging closer and closer to Shorty. Suddenly she leaned very close to him, whispered, softly: "Isn't this real romantic, Shorty—just you and I here together out under the moon and stars?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Shorty gulped. "It sure is. And—and you look mighty beautiful, Miss—Bess. You—well, you were so all-fired sweet to me, tonight at the supper table I was beginning to think that maybe—Well, gosh—"

Shorty never had a chance to say what he thought. At that moment there was the sound of crunching footsteps approaching. Then a tall shadowed figure loomed up in the darkness a short distance away.

Instantly, Bess flung her arms around Shorty Thompson's neck, hugged him tightly and planted a kiss on his cheek.

For a moment Shorty just stood there, stiff and trembling. And then, with a sigh, he took Bess in his arms, just as Hank Randall passed by.

IN A FEW moments Bess wriggled free from Shorty's now ardent embrace. She expected to see Hank, standing there, watching them. If what Titia had said, was true, Hank would be fighting mad. She'd have to do some fast talking and explaining to keep him from beating Shorty up. But there was nobody there.

Turning, Bess saw Hank's dim figure a few yards away, striding on toward the bunkhouse. "Oh!" she cried. He—he didn't stop. He didn't even see us—or if he did, it didn't bother him a bit that I was kissing another man. The fool! I hate him—hate him!"

With that, Bess whipped around and started to run toward the ranch house for all she was worth, leaving the stunned and puzzled Shorty standing there, scratching his curly blond head.

Inside the house, Bess rushed toward her own room, tears stinging her eyes. She passed Titia, coming out of the kitchen and the big woman tried to stop her, but Bess ran on. She entered her own room, flung herself across the bed and beat at the pillow with her fists.

Titia came in a few minutes later, sat down on the bed beside her. Bess explained what had happened.

Titia gave a big sigh, said: "He saw you, all right, honey. He couldn't have helped it. And it got him, I'm positive. I'll bet right now he's got a face on him long as a totem pole!"

"N-n-no, Titia," Bess said in a choky voice. "You're wrong—you've been wrong all along. He doesn't love me. I guess I'll just have to forget about him. I'll probably get over it after awhile. I'll go away for a few weeks, anything. Because I don't stand a chance with Hank. I'll only make more of a fool of myself if I keep it up."

For a long time, Titia didn't speak. She sat there, staring at Bess who had flung herself back on the bed and closed her eyes to keep the tears in. Gradually Titia's long green eyes narrowed and her V-shaped brows knitted in a frown. Then Titia stood up.

"Listen, Bess!" she said. "If you're giving up, I am, too. Ever since I met you I thought you had some real guts in you. I thought you had grit and determination. I thought you were a fighter. But I guess I was wrong. You ain't got any more spine than a jelly fish."

Bess pushed herself upright on the bed and stared at the big, redheaded woman in amazement. Bess demanded: "What—what did you say?"

"You heard me!" Titia's green eyes

flashed. "If I wanted a man as much as you want Hank Randall, damned if I wouldn't *make* him love me, no matter what. Hank is just one of those bashful men that never will take the initiative himself. The only thing for you to do now is to out and out and tell him that *you* love *him* and want to marry him—and what's he going to do about it!"

"You're loco!" Bess said. "What would he think of *me* proposing to *him* like that. After all I have some pride left. I couldn't do that. No girl could. Things like that just aren't done!"

"No? Well then I guess you've never heard of leap year, Bess. There aren't any *rules* when a girl loves a hombre the way you do Hank. You just go get him—no holds barred!"

Titia started for the door then. Just before she went out, she said: "Damned if I wouldn't do *something* to get my man—anything at all! But like I said before, I doggone well doubt if you've got the grit to do it!"

After Titia left the room, slammed the door behind her, Bess sat for a few minutes, staring into space, thinking over the things that had been said. Finally, she decided that Titia was right. She *was* spineless and weak, because no matter how much she might want to, she couldn't come right out and declare her love to Hank, *ask* him to marry her.

THE next morning Bess stayed around the ranch house for several hours. After breakfast she did some chores around the house that needed doing for a long time. She was miserable and deep in the blues. She didn't feel like seeing or talking to anyone. Especially, she didn't want to see Titia or Hank. She didn't feel as though she could face either one of them.

At eleven o'clock, Titia came in. Her plump cheeks were flushed with anger and her green eyes snapped. When she found Bess, she said: "There's going to be trouble, baby-doll. You are about to lose that long-legged, handsome foreman you are so crazy about!"

Bess demanded: "What are you talking about?"

"Vera Kane has come back," Titia said. "She's after Hank again. And this time it looks like she's going to be successful. He seems to be weakening."

Bess felt her breath catch in her throat. A little pulse started hammering in her temple, a warning of the storm of temper that was to come. She started toward the door.

"Why that painted-up blonde hussy!" Bess said. "I'll show her once and for all. I warned her not to come back here!"

"I'm afraid you won't do anything," Titia cut in. She reached out and grabbed Bess'

arm, stopped her headlong rush toward the door. "You see, honey, Vera Kane is smart. She's brought three of her hands along with her to protect her. And all of our boys except Hank are out on the range. You won't be able to get near her with those three there. I'm afraid Vera's too much for you, Bess. When she wants a man, she gets him!"

Bess stood still, staring at Titia as though she couldn't believe what she had said. First she turned deathly white. Then red splotches of anger came and went in her small, delicately pretty features. Finally she turned crimson with fury. A hard, bright light came into Bess's eyes. She whirled toward her own room and this time Titia didn't try to stop her.

"We'll see about that!" Bess said. "We'll see whether Miss Vera Kane gets her man or not!"

When Bess came back out into the kitchen, she had a sixgun in her tiny right fist. It looked as big as a cannon in her small grip. She strode past Titia and went on out into the yard. Before she had taken very many steps Titia came running up behind her.

"Where are they?" Bess demanded.

"Around by the corral," Titia said. "You'd better go back, Bess. Those are three tough-looking hombres Vera has with her."

Bess didn't answer. She kept walking, as fast, and as with as long strides as her short, slender legs would permit. As they rounded a couple of outbuildings, Bess saw that Titia was telling the truth. Over by the end corral, Vera Kane was standing talking to Hank Randall. She was standing very close to Hank, her face only inches from his. Nearby, sitting their broncs, were three of Vera's ranch hands—all lean and leathery looking hardcases, with sixguns swinging from their hips.

Just as Bess and Titia came into sight, they saw Vera Kane suddenly reach up and throw her arms around Hank's neck. Vera pulled his head down and planted a kiss firmly on his lips. When she moved back a second later, Hank just stood there, red around the ears, looking uncomfortable.

Vera Kane laughed. "Don't be so bashful, Hank, darling. I know you love me—have loved me for a long time. Only you've just been too backward to do anything about it. But I'm not. As you can see, I've brought three of my men over here to kidnap you. I'm taking you back with me to my place, Hank!"

Just as she finished speaking, Vera Kane suddenly jumped three feet off the ground as two dust spurts leaped a half inch from the high heels of her fancy boots and the sound of the two shots from Bess' gun echoed off across the range.

The three men on horseback, and Hank, all turned to see Bess come striding up, the smoking sixgun clenched in her fist.

"That was only a warning," Bess said. "The next shot will go through that no-good black heart of yours, unless you hop back on your horse and ride away from here—fast. And take those three gun-monkeys with you. Now move. Pronto!"

Vera Kane, pale, no longer smiling, said to the men on horseback. "Make her drop that smokepole, boys. This is going to be a showdown!"

Swiftly, Bess switched her gaze to Vera's riders.

"Drop that iron, lady!" one of Vera's punchers drawled. His sixgun was in his hand. Smoke curled lazily from the quirly stuck between his teeth. His eyes were cold and narrow. His face was wedge-shaped and mean as a snake's. Beard stubble was a dark shadow on his sunken cheeks.

"This is my property," Bess said. "Nobody gives orders on my ranch but me! If you're crazy enough to shoot, go ahead!"

FOR A LONG moment Bess and the thin-faced rider tried to stare each other down. It was a deadlock. But suddenly the man on horseback spat the cigarette from between his teeth. Without taking his eyes off of Bess and the gun in her fist, he swung his leg up over the horse's back, slid to the ground.

The other two riders remained in the saddle. Slowly, the snake-faced one advanced toward Bess. He stopped several yards from her. "For the last time, Miss Thatcher, drop that gun. I'll give you until I count three."

He counted twice. And then his trigger knuckle grew white. But he never said the number three. Hank Randall suddenly swung Vera Kane roughly to one side, drew

his .44 and blasted the gun from the snake-faced man's hand. Then he swung to face the two riders. "Well?" he taunted.

The two riders kept their hands on their saddle horns. One of them said: "We don't hold with hurtin' gals. Adios." They turned and cantered out of the ranch yard.

Hank holstered his gun and advanced on the snake-faced man, asking: "Would a poke in the jaw help you to git the hell off this ranch?"

The snake-faced one was nursing the bloody fingers of his right hand. "I'm goin' right away," he muttered and climbed on his horse. He didn't wait for his blonde boss, or pay any attention to her.

As the snake-face disappeared in a cloud of dust, Bess handed her sixgun to Titia. Bess looked straight at Hank, but she spoke to Vera Kane. "Blondie, you've broken the ice, so I guess I'll have to fight this thing out, your way. I love Hank Randall, too. More than you ever did or could! But I don't want him, if he wants you. We'll leave it up to him."

She turned then, to Hank and her eyes were shining hot and bright as reddish-brown coals. "Hank," she said, "you just heard me say I loved you. Now I'm telling you I'd like for you to marry me. If it's me being a ranch owner you're worrying about, I can take care of that. I'll give the ranch to Titia here, and we'll both work for her. That'll sort of even things up. Now tell us—tell Vera and me, which one of us you want?"

A slow grin broke out on Hank's face. "Hell, Bess, that ain't no hard decision for me to make. It's you I want, Bess. I always have wanted you—I didn't know how you felt about me."

Suddenly Vera Kane screetched: "You big redheaded rhinocerous, *you* did this! You tricked me. You came over to my place this morning early and told me that you'd been talking to Hank Randall and that he was loco about *me*, and that he wanted to come work for me, but was just too bashful to come right out with it. You told me if I came over here and sort of forced things along I'd— Why, you ornery, double-dealing—" Vera stopped.

Titia was coming toward her with long strides, rolling up a sleeve.

But before Titia reached the blonde girl, Bess darted in between them. "Oh, no, Titia," Bess said. "The pleasure is all *mine!*"

Vera tried to turn and run toward her horse, but before she'd taken more than three steps, Bess caught up with her, whirled her around. Then Bess reached out and grabbed Vera's hand. Suddenly Bess twisted and yanked at Vera's arm. The blonde girl came smashing up against Bess' jutted hip. A moment later Vera went flying over Bess' bent back, landed sprawled out in the dust.

Vera Kane picked herself off the ground and walked stiffly to her horse.

Titia said to Bess: "You should have charged an admission to see that!"

Bess winked at Titia, then went to Hank. This time he didn't avoid her glance. His eyes burned into hers.

"Darling . . ." he said, as Bess walked into his embrace. And that was all he said because right after that, Bess' mouth was brushing against his and their lips were blending in a long, breath-taking kiss.

When they finally broke apart, they self-consciously turned to where Titia had been standing. But Titia was no longer there.

Slowly, Bess and Hank started to walk back toward the ranch house, stopping every few minutes to again sample the special brand of heaven they had found in each other's arms.

When they finally reached the house, they started in the door and then stopped, silently. Sitting on a kitchen chair was Titia. Sitting comfortably on her lap was Shorty Thompson. Titia was telling him:

"Are you sure it was just an infatuation you had for that pretty little boss of ours, Shorty? If so, I'll forgive you. You see, Shorty, I couldn't go after my man, tell you how I felt, until I had helped the boss out of her trouble. But now, I guess everything is all right. . . ."

Shorty cupped her lovely, radiant face between his hands and kissed her.

Slowly, Hank and Bess backed out of the doorway. "I guess," Bess said, "that we can wait until later to thank Titia for all that she's done for us. She seems to be busy right now."

"Yes," Hank agreed. "She seems to have the right idea too." Once again he took Bess into his arms. . . .

THE END

♥ LOVABLE ♥ LITTLE LIAR

By Ennen Reaves Hall

Pert Lexie had to convince the wild cowtown of Ocheta that her adored Gregory was in love with beautiful, man-grabbing Fern.

LEXIE Walters nudged her pony to a faster gait as she came in sight of town. There was so much excitement in Ocheta these days. Strange men, on horseback, in fancy rigs and afoot, crowded the short, dusty main street until every day looked like rodeo time. And there was excited talk, all about leases and royalty and drilling and spudding in—strange talk, indeed, for a little Oklahoma cowtown. . . . And there was Gregory Harrel.

The thought of Gregory Harrel was the force that was pulling Lexie to town in spite of the fact that she would probably incur the displeasure of her uncle-guardian, Hiram Walters, in coming. Fern, her cousin, would see to that because Fern had wanted Lexie to stay at home and mend for her today. But Lexie hated mending.

The thought of seeing Gregory Harrel, maybe even speaking to the broad-shouldered, blonde young giant, was like an intoxicant to Lexie. It put wild roses in her cheeks, and dancing lights in her velvety black eyes and sent the blood pounding wildly through her veins. It had been that way since the first time she'd seen him. Two days ago, that was. Two long days crammed with impatience, for she could think of nothing else but the good looking stranger.

She remembered every feature, even his little peculiarities—the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he talked earnestly, his quick smile that came and went with almost startling rapidity. Things like that, that made her feel she had known him for always.

Yet she didn't know Gregory Harrel at all. She had only watched, unseen, from the hay loft while he talked to Uncle Hiram. It was his pleasant voice that had attracted her when he introduced himself in his direct way: "I'm Gregory Harrel, Mr. Walters. I've a drilling contract with your neighbor, Allbright, and I need a block of protective leases. How about yours?"

Hi Walters hadn't been encouraging. He had branding work on for that day and he was interested only in getting away. So he'd been gruff and ill tempered, but even so Lexie had thrilled at the way Gregory Harrel kept his pleasant smile, his easy charm. In leaving he had said, "Think it over, Mr. Walters, and I'll see you again."

That 'see you again' had been a bright rainbow in Lexie's sky for two days. And she had resolved that when he came again Gregory Harrel would see her. For she had left her lofty perch only after the young driller had gone that day. What girl wants to meet her dream man when she's barefooted and wearing jeans soiled from her nightly chores of hog feeding? Lexie could wait. . . .

But two days of waiting had seemed a long time. That was why Lexie was now on her way to Ocheta, dressed in her one good riding skirt and silk blouse, and with her heavy dark hair braided and wound in shining coils about her head. She wouldn't be ashamed to have him see her today. She meant to be sure he did see her.

Fern, Lexie's lovely blonde cousin, had been frankly suspicious of this trip to town. "Why so dolled up, Lexie? Have you found you a beau among those oil slickers?"

"That's my supper box," fumed Lexie. "You needn't look so disappointed!"

Lexie hadn't told her, of course. For several reasons. One was that Fern didn't believe in love at first sight, would poke hilarious fun at the idea. For another, Fern didn't believe in Lexie having any beaus. All attractive men belonged upon her altar and she took malicious delight in attaching to herself any man who showed interest in Lexie.

And because Fern's hair was like spun gold and her skin the texture of a sun-ripened peach and her laughter and talk flowed lightly and easily, it had never proved to be much of a task to take Lexie's men. And because Lexie had to live with Fern, and was dependent upon the charity of the blonde girl's father, Lexie had never dared make it hard for her. But she had always felt like she could.

IN OCHETA Lexie skirted the crowded street and rode straight to the town watering trough to let her pony drink before leaving him at the hitch rail near by. Without dismounting she loosened the check rein so his head could reach the low trough.

Two men crossed the dusty square and came toward her and her heart skipped a beat as she saw that one was Gregory Harrel.

The other was Ad Nelson, heavy featured, sharp eyed bank clerk who had been a persistent, but unsuccessful, suitor of Fern Walters for years.

The men seemed to be arguing about something. As they drew near Ad raised his voice:

"You're a damned liar, Harrel. And I'm warning you now, I'm getting that lease myself."

Lexie gasped as Gregory Harrel stopped short in his tracks, pivoted about and swung his fist in a sharp uppercut to the other man's chin. It snapped Ad Nelson's head back, lifted him off his feet and sent him sprawling flat on his back. He lay there for an instant, then sat up and shook his head dazedly.

Gregory Harrel made no move to follow up his blow. He just stood there, legs spread apart, fists clenched, until he was sure Ad was getting up. And his voice, reaching Lexie was strangely unruffled as he said, "That's just to remind you to be careful about calling men liars, Nelson."

Then he turned to walk away, his back toward the man on the ground. But Lexie knew Ad Nelson and was watching him closely. She saw the first move of his hand toward his hip. Jabbing her spurs into her pony she sent the startled animal running past Ad, and leaning over she struck his hand a stinging lash with her quirt. His hand left his holster, empty, and he jumped to his feet with a howl of pain and rage. Greg Harrel swung about, took in what had happened at a glance.

"I had you down as a coward, Nelson," he said scathingly, "but I didn't figure you yellow enough to shoot a man in the back."

Ad Nelson nursed his lashed wrist, his face full of sullen anger. "Who said I was going to shoot? That little fool just jumped to conclusions because she don't like me."

"I hope it was her mistake and not yours," was all Greg said, but his quiet voice was full of warning.

Then he turned and looked at Lexie, who had returned to the hitch rail and dismounted, seeing her for the first time. Looking up, her eyes met his and sharp awareness passed between them, as exciting and jarring as an electrical current. As though drawn by some powerful magnet he came toward her until he stood very close. When he spoke his voice was no longer quietly controlled, but queerly shaken. But she knew it was not shaken by fear. Knew because of the wild tumult in her own heart.

"Thanks, Miss. He probably did mean to shoot."

"Of course," was all Lexie could say. She said that breathlessly, their eyes still held in that locked grip.

"I'm Greg Harrel, miss. I'm new here."

"I know," she interrupted. "I saw you out at the Flying W the other day. I'm Lexie Walters."

"You're very lovely, Lexie Walters," he said softly. "I wish I could say my thanks as I'd like to."

Without any coquetry Lexie asked, simply, "How would you like to, Greg?"

"This way," he answered, and bent his head and kissed her.

It was a hard, quick kiss. And it was infinitely sweet and tender. As wonderful

as Lexie had dreamed it would be and when he freed her mouth she felt weak and trembling, as though she'd been running for miles.

"Now I know why I came to Ocheta," he said softly.

Lexie knew she should voice a protest she didn't feel. "You had no right to do that," she said weakly.

His blue eyes twinkled. "Shall I say I'm sorry? If I did I'd be the liar Ad Nelson called me. Lexie, when can I see you again? There's a lot we have to say to each other."

Lexie knew that was true. There was so much she wanted to hear. But she wasn't going to risk sharing him with Fern. Not yet.

"Sometimes I ride in the evening, after my chores are done," she faltered. "I—I like riding along Indian Creek. . . ."

He took her up eagerly. "Do you know where Blue Hole is, on the Allbright place? Meet me there this evening, Lexie, and I'll show you where I'm going to spud in my well in a few days."

There were some men coming toward the hitch rail. Until then Lexie had forgotten that they were not alone in the world. With a nod of agreement she turned away and hurried off on her improvised errand in town. There was no use lingering now. She'd accomplished what she came to do. She'd met Gred Harrel. Her heart sang gayly all the way home and for once she never worried about what Fern might say.

It was said by those who knew Hi Walters that he only had one interest in life—his motherless daughter, Fern. He idolized her and never left a wish of hers ungranted if he could help it. Nothing was as important to him as keeping her happy. That fact accounted, in no small part, for some of Fern's popularity. If a man had to do business with Hi Walters he much preferred having Fern Walters on his side.

Lexie, his orphaned niece, had no reason to feel that Hi cared deeply for her. As long as she relieved Fern of housekeeping duties, helped with the outside chores and made a cowhand when needed, she was given a home and accepted as a member of the family. But Lexie had learned the hard way that her conduct must meet with Fern's approval at all times. Since Fern's jealousy made that a difficult task sometimes, Lexie had often had to resort to small subterfuges for the sake of peace.

SO THAT evening she rode away with hammering pulse, after telling Hi she thought she'd seen a stray calf up the creek. But she didn't look for mavericks. She rode straight for Blue Hole, where her heart was already waiting under the willows. Since morning there had been no room in her mind for anything but this twilight tryst with Greg Harrel.

He was waiting and came eagerly to meet her, so that when she slipped from her pony she found herself in his arms. And again his touch brought that wild, reckless excitement flooding her and she lifted her lips without question to meet his kiss.

It came, and it was even sweeter than she'd remembered it to be. It would always be like that, she thought with innocent wisdom. Each kiss Greg Harrel gave her, through all their lives to come, would be sweeter than the last. For Lexie knew this man, out of a world of men, was hers. He had to be.

"Lexie, sweet," he murmured against her hair, "I've lived a year since this morning, waiting for this. Darling, what have you done to me?"

"Stolen your heart," she laughed, in full confidence. "Oh, Greg, I know how you feel. I felt that way, too, the very first time I saw you."

The hour passed in a flash, as such hours do. Lexie tore herself away, knowing only a part of her would ride back to the Flying W. For she would be only partly alive until she saw Greg Harrel again.

"Tomorrow," she promised him. "You still haven't shown me where your well will be, Greg."

* * *

Fern and her father were on the veranda when Lexie got back. "Where's the stray?" Fern asked maliciously. "Why didn't you bring him around, Lex? Afraid to introduce me?"

"What are you talking about, Fern?" Hi asked. "Lexie's just been looking for a calf."

"Don't be fooled, Dad." The blonde girl laughed and the sound of it was malicious, too. "Do you think she'd wear her best

silk shirt for a calf? Not unless it was the two-legged, male variety. I think you should talk to her."

"Now, look here, Lex!" Hiram bellowed obediently. "I won't have you running off and meeting men! You have your friends come here where I can look them over. There's too many oil slickers about these days!"

Lexie pushed her way past them and ran for her room, followed by her uncle's angry voice and her cousin's light laughter. For the first time in her life she didn't mind either. Nothing could hurt her any more, nothing could touch her. She was no longer a penniless and lonely orphan. She was rich, she had everything. For now she had Greg Harrel. She went to sleep hugging the thought close for its comforting warmth.

It was mid-morning the next day and Lexie and Fern were shelling peas on the shady veranda when Fern exclaimed, "Oh, my, look what's coming, Lex. A sun god, made to order."

But it wasn't a sun god. It was Greg Harrel dismounting in the yard and Lexie suddenly couldn't breathe for the excited tumult in her body. Greg, coming here! She had asked him not to just yet. But perhaps he had decided to come and ask Uncle Hi for her hand in marriage! Her heart was singing wildly, though her legs trembled weakly, as she got to her feet.

"Greg!" she cried softly, and was aware of the knowing look Fern flashed her. Too late she tried to sound and look casual.

"Good morning, Lexie." He stood before them, hat in hand, and he wasn't the Greg of the night before at all. He was just a polite, casual speaking visitor and Lexie felt strangely rebuffed and hurt. "Is Mr. Walters about? I've got to talk to him again about that lease."

"Oh!" Lexie bit her lips to stop their childish trembling. Of course she should have known what Greg would be wanting, but she'd forgotten what had first brought him here. "Uncle Hi is still branding," she began uncertainly.

Fern interrupted quickly. "I'll be glad to show you where Father is. That is, if Lexie will introduce us. I'm sure Dad won't mind stopping to talk to you, if *I* ask it." She put a pretty emphasis on the 'I'.

Making the introduction Fern had asked, Lexie was further hurt to see the light of interest that sprang into Greg's eyes at sight of Fern. And the pain grew sharper as he said eagerly, "Would you take me there, Miss Fern? It's mighty important to me to get your father to listen to my proposition."

Fern was only too willing and Lexie saw them ride away with scarcely a backward glance. And now the pain was knifing so deep she thought her heart must be dripping slow drops of blood with each heavy beat. Important, Greg had said. It was important for him to talk business with Hi Walters, nothing more. As important as their love? As important as last night?

That was unfair, she told herself. Greg couldn't act any different than he had, with Fern standing there watching them. But nothing she could think of helped that shut out, lonely feeling she'd had as they rode away, laughing and talking.

Nothing could make her forget the light that had come into Greg's eyes as he looked at her lovely cousin. And worse still, the look in Fern's eyes. Lexie knew that look and it frightened her. Fern always got what she wanted. Suppose she decided to want Greg? The very thought filled Lexie with nausea, and she went about her morning's work.

HOURS passed and Fern and Greg didn't return. It was mid afternoon and dinner still waited when she saw two horses coming. Her heart rose in her throat, then fell with a painful thud as the horses got close enough for her to recognize Fern and her father. That meant Greg had gone on without a word. . . .

Fern came in, humming gayly. "I'm hungry as a bear, Lex. Greg took me all over the hills, showing me his oil field dreams. I thought he'd never let up."

Lexie controlled her voice with difficulty. "Is Uncle Hi going to give him a lease?"

Fern shrugged. "We never saw Dad till Greg had left me. Greg decided to wait and see him another time."

Never saw him! Then it wasn't the leases that were so important, after all. It was Fern! Lexie, taking a hot dish from the oven, almost dropped it as Fern went on.

"He's taking me to the box supper in

Ocheta tomorrow night. I hope you don't mind, Lex. You can go in with Dad."

After a long moment Lexie was able to say, almost carelessly, "Of course I don't mind. Why should I?"

But she did mind, terribly. She had planned to tell Greg about the box supper and dance that very night. She had so happily anticipated going with him, proud for everyone to see them together. Fern had said she wasn't going.

All afternoon fears and doubts hammered at her until she felt bruised and torn. Would Greg still want to meet her at Blue Hole that evening? Should she go? And what should she say to him?

Then suddenly it was all settled for her, quickly and finally. For near sundown Greg appeared and Fern rushed out to meet him. "You promised to show me the sunset from Indian Hill," Lexie heard him say and something died in her.

Greg had forgotten their promise to meet, had remembered only the one with Fern. She went about her nightly chores with her usual swift efficiency but as she worked her mind was painfully folding away each cherished, short lived dream.

She was sitting in a dark corner of the veranda, holding a wake over those dead dreams, when Fern and Greg returned. She saw them coming toward the house and made herself as small as possible, not wanting to be seen.

She heard Fern's light laugh, heard her say in her quick, careless way. "Stop stewing, Greg. I'll straighten out everything for you. Haven't I promised?"

"And you'll be sure Lexie understands?" Greg sounded anxious.

While Lexie was wondering what Greg wanted her to understand Fern's light laugh cut at her again. "Of course. Don't worry another minute about Lexie. I can always handle her and Dad."

So that was it. Greg just wanted to be sure he wasn't too involved with Lexie. Blinding pain tore at Lexie, but not so blinding that she couldn't see Fern move closer to Greg, was sure that he was kissing her. And only last night—or was it a century ago?—he had kissed Lexie, had told her he loved her—

No, she corrected herself, honestly, he hadn't actually said he loved her. She had just taken it for granted that he felt as she did because he had kissed her as he had, because he'd said tender, endearing words to her.

Then, in the soft darkness of her porch corner, with Fern so near in the arms of the man she loved, Lexie had to face the truth. She had been a fool. A trusting, naive fool. She had thought a kiss meant so much, when she should have known that it might mean little or nothing—as well as everything!

After a bitter eternity Greg rode away and Fern came in, humming softly. In spite of Lexie's efforts to shrink down further into her chair Fern saw her and laughed.

"Spying on me, Lex? Well, I like your big driller. He's exciting, isn't he?"

Anger and hurt pride brought Lexie to her feet. "He's not my driller," she said sharply. "And I don't know how exciting you found him. That kiss you just got didn't look so terribly exciting."

Fern laughed again, undisturbed. She was always so maddeningly sure of herself. "Maybe the one you got by Blue Hole was, though. And maybe the next I get will be, too."

Scratch your head*
and if you find . . .
You've got dandruff
on your mind . . .

CONTAINS LANOLIN
GET WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
GROOMS THE HAIR — RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF
*THE FAMOUS FINGER-NAIL (F-N) TEST

She went in, leaving Lexie helpless with anger and hurt. So Greg had told Fern of that tryst, had doubtless laughed with her about it. While to Lexie it had been a sacred hour, a holy place. . . .

All the pain in her heart seemed to congeal together into a hard ball of hatred. She hated Fern, who had been snatching things from her all her life and now had taken the one beautiful thing that mattered. And she hated, with a passion that shook her like a storm, Greg Harrel, who had taken her proffered heart so carelessly, dropped it so quickly. Who seemed to take love making as lightly as most men took a game of checkers or dominoes. Pick them up and lay them down at will! That was all last night had meant to him. In Lexie's heart now was left nothing but a burning desire for revenge. Someway, she would even this score with Greg Harrel!

RIGHT after breakfast the next morning Fern saddled and rode away. Lexie didn't have to ask where she was going. It was written all over her eager face that she was meeting Greg Harrel. Bitterness gnawed at Lexie as she fixed a cold drink for her uncle while he rested in the shade of the veranda.

There was the sound of voices and she knew Hi had a visitor. But she didn't know who it was until she went back to find Ad Nelson there. At sight of him she stopped short, feeling her face flame. But there was no self conscious note in Ad's greeting. Only a hint of mockery in his eyes and his voice.

"Good morning, Lexie. You not feeling so scrappy today, I hope?"

"I hope you don't get me that way," she said, tartly.

Hi Walters laughed, good naturedly. "Lexie's all right if you don't get her mad. But it ain't safe, stepping on her toes."

"She's got long toes, too," Ad said, dryly.

"And good eyes," Lexie snapped back, and now it was Ad's turn to color. He turned back to Walters and resumed their conversation.

"I'd like to see you do business with the New Territory Syndicate, Hi. They'll pay you a top price for mineral rights on that west range of yours. They've authorized me to deal for them and—"

"No use, Ad," Walters broke in, getting to his feet. "It's like I told you. I'm willing to sell oil rights on the land but I promised Fern she could have the say about who got them. She wheedled that out of me this morning." He grinned, and there was a mixture of sheepishness and pride in his face. "You know I do pretty much as she tells me, anyway."

Angry disappointment filled Ad Nelson's heavy face. "Yeah, and it's a cinch who she'll tell you to give it to. I met her and Greg Harrel on the way here. He's just a cheap skate who figures the way to get something out of a man is to flatter his women folks. He started off with Lexie but switched to Fern when he found out she could do more for him."

"I reckon Fern can take care of herself," Hi said, starting for the corral and plainly not impressed by Nelson's tirade. "I'll talk to her again, Ad, and let you know."

Lexie stood rigidly still, all her thoughts revolving around those angry words of Ad Nelson's. They had made everything suddenly clear. Horribly clear. Greg had never cared about her, nor did he care about Fern. Greg was after leases! That first time, when she'd told him "I'm Lexie Walters . . . I saw you at the Flying W," he had doubtless assumed she was Hi Walters' daughter. When he discovered his mistake he had dropped her and picked up Fern.

Deep inside Lexie a dam seemed to break and now her whole being was flooded with a consuming hatred and a burning desire for revenge. Greg Harrel mustn't be allowed to get away with such a low trick! She clenched her hands in raging fury as she silently vowed to find some way to stop him.

Ad Nelson was watching her narrowly. "He's slick, that fellow. Smooth as melted wax. But I bet he never fooled you long, Lexie."

"No!" she said violently. "He never fooled me at all. I hate him!"

"I figured you did," he said, mockingly. "I reckon that's why you were kissing him so hard yesterday morning."

"I never!" Lexie cried so fiercely that Ad began a hasty retreat. "I tell you I hate him!"

"All right, Lexie. But if you hate him so hard why don't you help me get that lease away from him? Greg Harrel wants that

mighty bad, I tell you. Bad enough to marry Fern to get it if he has to. Why don't you try talking to Fern?"

"It wouldn't do any good," Lexie said, truthfully. "Fern would just think I was jealous and that would please her. But there ought to be some way. . . ."

SHE thought a minute or two, wanting worse than she had ever wanted anything to do something to hurt Greg Harrel. Then an idea struck her and she knew at once it would work—because she knew Fern.

"It's simple," she told Ad Nelson. "All we have to do is get her angry at Greg Harrel. Right now she's having fun thinking she's taking him away from me. But if she got really mad at him she'd give you that lease to spite him. See?"

An avid glow sprang to life in Nelson's eyes. "Now you're talking smart, Lexie. But how do we start?"

"He's coming out tonight to take her to the box supper, Ad. She's counting big on it. If he didn't show up, just left her waiting out here without a word till the dancing was about over, she'd be wild. Suppose you came out then. Said you'd missed her and came for her. You'd get to the party late and Fern is already very much out of humor. Then she finds Greg is there, having a good time with me, and she just blows up. Simple, isn't it?"

"The way you make it sound it is. But how do you figure to keep Greg away, Lexie?"

"Just wait a minute." She ran into the house, returning in a few moments with an envelope which she gave to him.

"There, Ad. Just see that he gets that late this afternoon. But don't let him know you know about it."

He took the envelope, turned it over cautiously. "What does it say, Lex?" he asked.

"It says Uncle Hi insists on all of us coming in together tonight and for him not to come out. And it says it might be best for their plans if he doesn't come near her until she gives the signal. But if he wants to bid on her box it will be a blue and gold one, tied with a yellow ribbon. And the note is signed Fern."

He whistled. "I said you were smart. But why tell him the color of her box?"

"Because her name won't be in it." Lexie's laugh was short. "I'll fix our boxes. I always do. So he'll be bidding on mine. And you bid on hers, a red, white and blue one. Then when you're eating you bring up the subject of the lease. She ought to be good and ready to give it to you by then."

He chuckled as he swung into his saddle. "And I ought to be able to forget that crack across the wrist yesterday. Tell you what, Lexie. If I get this lease for the New Territory people I'll buy you a new quirt. A silver mounted one."

"If you don't get it, it'll be your fault, Ad. I know Fern and I'm making it easy for you."

Lexie knew her scheme was working as she started to leave the house that evening with Hi Walters. There was no sign of Greg Harrel yet and Fern was becoming impatient. Fern very much hated to be kept waiting.

"He said he'd come early," she complained for the dozenth time. "We'll be late for the dancing if he doesn't hurry."

"Oh, he'll be along," Lexie kept assuring her, while sardonic laughter bubbled inside her. "Just give him time, Fern. And in case you're late I'll take your box along."

Hi Walters looked back at the slender solitary figure on the porch as they drove away. "I hate leaving her alone like this. There's no telling, that man may not show up."

"Oh, he'll come," Lexie repeated. "He wants that lease too bad to stay away." But she was thinking, with something like revulsion, what an accomplished liar she had suddenly become. How many fibs had she told since Greg Harrel had come into her life? Too many, which made another score to settle with him.

Walters frowned. "I'd really like Ad to get that lease. His company will pay a little more. I wish Fern could be presuaded."

This time Lexie was relieved that she could speak the truth. "I think Fern will see it that way before long, Uncle Hi. Don't worry." And to herself she wondered if Hi Walters had ever thought of any other method of influencing Fern other than persuasion. Not in all the years Lexie had known them.

Then she put Fern out of her mind and tried to outline the rest of her night's cam-

paign. Never in her life had she tried acting a part and she knew the role she'd assigned herself would be a hard one. It would be bitterly hard facing Greg Harrel with her changed feelings for him, and to smile and pretend things were the same while hate seethed in her. But she would do it, she vowed fiercely. She would keep him away from Fern if she had to let him kick the fragments of her broken heart all around the room.

She looked down with satisfaction and smoothed the skirt of her new, flame colored dress. That dress ought to help. It was daring and its bright color gave her a new vivacity, made her feel reckless. Fern had disapproved of it. "It's too bold," she'd said. But now Lexie was glad she had it. Tonight she was going to be bold.

Hi Walters saw her hand touch the dress and smiled down at her. "You're looking mighty pretty, Lexie. And gay, but sort of Fourth-of-Julyish."

Lexie's laugh was reckless and she knew Hi Waters never noticed that note of tears in it. "You mean I look like a fire cracker, Uncle Hi? I feel that way, too. And tonight I'm going to explode right in somebody's face. You wait and see."

A SQUARE dance set was just forming when they got to the town hall. The fiddlers were tuning up and the caller was bawling for the men to choose their partners.

The first man Lexie saw was Greg Harrel. He was loitering near the door, his eyes anxious. He hurried to meet her and the touch of his hand on her arm was flame and ice to Lexie. She was suddenly weak as water but his first words stiffened her. "Where is Fern? Didn't she come with you?"

"She'll be along later," Lexie said, and saw the flash of relief in his eyes. But when she added, deliberately cruel, "with Ad Nelson," the relief vanished and anxiety returned.

"Ad Nelson? But she said she was coming with you and Mr. Walters."

Lexie shrugged, managed to say lightly, "She must have changed her mind. There's no telling about Fern."

The worry didn't leave his face but as he looked at her warmth came into it. His hand on her arm tightened and Lexie was afraid he could feel the storm inside her.

"You're so lovely, Lexie. You don't care about dancing, do you? Let's go somewhere where we can talk. It's been so long, darling."

Lexie's defenses almost crumbled. For a second she was back under the willows, tasting the sweetness of a first deep love. Then she quickly hardened her heart against his pleading voice. Pick them up and lay them down, she reminded herself, grimly. Fern or me, it doesn't seem to matter at all to him. And I won't let it matter to me anymore, either.

So she made her voice carelessly gay as she took his arm and drew him over to join the others. "I'm crazy about dancing, Greg. I want to dance every single set."

From then on she was whirled from partner to partner, breathless and laughing and gay. And thoroughly miserable. And through it all she managed to keep Greg close to her and was fiercely glad that his face was troubled and unhappy.

Fern and Ad Nelson arrived just as the auctioning of the supper boxes began. Fern's eyes were stormy and Lexie laughed silently and snuggled closer to Greg. She knew Fern saw them. Ad would see to that.

But she held Greg's attention so he didn't notice the late arrivals at once. The trouble in his eyes deepened as he looked down at her and said: "Lexie, what is wrong? You're different tonight. You're brittle and hard like."

Lexie told him gayly, "This is just the second time you've seen me, Greg. Maybe this is just the real me."

"I don't believe it," he said, softly and she was glad the bidding on the boxes started just then.

The blue and yellow box was one of the first offered. Greg began bidding at once and Lexie pretended to pout. "You didn't ask if that was mine," she reminded him.

"It's Fern's," he answered frankly, to her surprise. "She's here now, Lexie, and I've got to see her." Then he doubled his first bid.

Other men became interested, so when Greg finally went up to claim it, amid much laughter and applause, he had paid ten dollars for the blue and gold box. And Lexie saw that Fern's face was more than

stormy now. It was furious, for Fern knew whose box Greg had been bidding so vigorously for.

With fast beating heart Lexie watched Greg open the box and take out the slip of paper with her name on it. The dismay in his face was suddenly more than she could bear. It suddenly seemed the brittle pieces of her heart were flying all about her and she jumped to her feet, lashing out at him furiously.

"That's my supper box," fumed Lexie. "You needn't look so disappointed. Go and eat with Fern if you want to so bad. I wouldn't eat with you if I was starving!"

Terribly afraid the threatening tears wouldn't be held back any longer, Lexie ran from the long room, out into the cool darkness. Avoiding the loungers about the door she made for the buckboard. She could cry there and not be seen by the merry-makers.

THERE were running steps behind her and strong arms stopped her, swung her about. Greg's voice said, "Lexie, darling, darling! I didn't mean to hurt you. I thought you understood I wanted a chance to talk to Fern about that lease. She promised me she would give an answer tonight."

Then before she could protest, he drew her face to meet his and kissed her. And again Lexie was lost in the thrilling ecstacy this man's lips could stir in her. Hurt and duplicity were forgotten as she clung to him and felt again that sweep of love surge through her. When he released her lips at last she knew, with bitter finality, that it was utterly futile to deny her love for him. And just as futile to attempt revenge. No matter what he did to her she would always love him and she couldn't consciously hurt him.

"Greg," she begged, "does it mean a lot to you to get hold of that lease of Uncle Hi's?"

"It means everything to me, Lexie," he answered, gravely. "I might be ruined without it. I've already put all the money I have into equipment for my well. To get financial backing for drilling I have to have a protective block of leases. Ad Nelson and his gang plan to hold me up if they get it. I won't be able to pay what they demand so I'll have to sell to them for a song. It's the old squeeze game, darling, and you couldn't understand. But I have to have that lease."

Lexie didn't need to understand. She could hear the note of desperate worry in Greg's voice and it cut her through and through. The burning desire for revenge was gone and there was nothing left in her heart but the pure flame of an unselfish love. She must help Greg and she knew she could. But it would be hard because it

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meant losing him forever. She could expect Fern to see to that.

"Maybe you can get it yet, Greg, if we hurry," she said, drawing him back toward the hall. "Fern is angry with you but it's all my fault. Just wait here at the door until I beckon you, then bring over the lease. And—be nice to Fern. The whole thing is up to her."

She left him then and went over to where Fern and Ad Nelson and Hi Walters sat, the appetizing contents of Fern's supper box spread out before them. They had something else of interest, too. It was a legal looking paper and Ad was showing Hi where to sign his name.

"Wait a minute, Uncle Hi," Lexie pleaded, breathlessly. "I don't think Fern will want you to sign when I tell her something. She hasn't any reason to be angry with Greg Harrel. Ad and I tricked both of you. I—I was jealous of Fern."

It was hard, faltering out her confession under Fern's blazing eyes but she managed it. As she finished Ad's angry voice broke the brief silence. Fearing his victory was about to turn into defeat he made the mistake of getting panicky.

"You're too late, Lexie. Hi's already agreed to sign and he can't back out now just because you got cold feet."

"Why can't he?" Fern's voice was icy cool but Lexie knew her anger had been switched from Greg to Ad. "He hasn't signed and now that we know how contemptible and tricky you and Lexie have been I'm sure he won't. Call Greg over, Lexie."

"But you can't do this, Mr. Walters," Ad cried. "This was all Lexie's idea. She was sore because this guy's been making love to both of them."

And then Lexie saw she had to tell one more lie. She did it magnificiently, thinking only of helping Greg. "Greg hasn't made love to me. He's—he's crazy about Fern."

She beckoned Greg then, knowing from the look in Fern's face that things would be all right for him. As he came up she slipped away, wanting only to get away and weep her heart out. Greg had won but Lexie had lost. Fern would tell him how she had lied and he would despise her.

She took the team and buckboard and drove home alone, leaving her uncle to follow with Fern and Greg. That was the way it would always be now, she thought dully.

She huddled at the open window of the dark living room when she heard them come. Hi Walters came in and went to his room, but Fern and Greg lingered on the veranda, their voices coming plain to Lexie.

"Where do you suppose she is?" Greg asked.

Fern laughed and the sound was brittle sharp. "Sulking some where. Lexie always sulks when she's been bad."

"I don't think she's been bad," Greg answered, firmly, and Lexie's dead heart came to sudden life. "I think she's just been hurt. You let her think I was making love to you when all the time—"

Fern's voice, coldly angry, cut in: "When all the time you wanted nothing but a lease. And now that you've tricked me into giving you that, don't you think you'd better go?"

"Not until I see Lexie," he announced definitely. "I'm going to tell her what you promised to, but didn't. I'm going to tell her that I told you about us yesterday morning and you promised to help. You told me Mr. Walters was opposed to giving a lease and that you'd have to talk him into it but if he knew I was interested in Lexie he'd never consent. So I left it to you because it was so important to me to get that least because I couldn't ask Lexie to marry me without it. I told you all that yesterday, Fern. Now I'm going to tell Lexie if I have to camp on your doorstep for a week. You going to call her for me?"

But Fern didn't need to call Lexie. Almost before Greg had finished she was there in the warm circle of his arms, clinging to him as though she could never let go.

"Tell me, Greg," she begged. "Keep telling me all the days of my life. Tell me you love me in spite of the way I lied."

"Lovable little liar," he murmured against her lips, "Don't you know I'd rather have you than everything else in the world? But a man wants something to offer his wife. . . ."

The door slammed and from inside the house came Fern's brittle voice. "Well, Dad, it seems I've just been playing Cupid. That's a new role for me, isn't it?"

Pin-Up Girl

She's good at casting glances—

This gorgeous brunette dish;

But in her big romances

....

To finish the limerick in this March contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this March contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on February 27th, 1945. The judges' decision will be final. . . . See announcement of winner of December contest on page 59.

♥ ♥ THE ANGEL

Exciting Frontier-Romance Novelette

Lovely Elaine had to hide the outlaw she loved in one room—while, in the next room, she entertained the sheriff with Judas kisses.

AND THE OUTLAW

"Sorry to bust this up."

By Art Lawson

CHAPTER ONE

The Outlaw

ELAINE LEE saw the canoe shortly after it had drifted around the willow-studded bend of Lazy River above the mill dam. It came very slowly, wheel-

ing sluggishly in the weary current. At first she thought the canoe was half full of water because it rode so low in the stream. Then a series of ripples ran from it across the river's surface glistening in the starlight and she knew that something had moved *inside* the canoe.

It might be a man—or an animal. But that something, whatever it was, was huddled in the bottom out of sight—apparenly unable to guide the canoe away from the dam's spillway.

Elaine, dressed only in levis and shirt, hesitated hardly a minute before plunging into the mill pond to swim after the drifting canoe. She swam easily, rhythmically. She intercepted the canoe before it reached the swifter current where water roared over the dam, and kicked and pushed it into the shallows before hoisting herself up on the gunwale to look inside.

Though Elaine had half guessed what she would find there, there was something indescribably shocking in the laxness of the cowboy sprawled in the canoe's bottom with arms outflung and face half buried in bilgewater. And her nostrils stung with the acridness of blood.

Elaine dropped back into the pond. Her knuckles whitened as she clung to the canoe and her heart almost stopped beating. During the moments while she had been staring at her grusome find the canoe had drifted back into the current. Now Elaine set herself to struggle toward shore. She pushed and tugged until her feet touched shore. Then she dragged the canoe onto the shelving bank near the mill where she lived, and with quickening heart looked into it again.

The man had turned onto his side. Despite the dirt he semed white as salt in the night. Though he was not much older than Elaine his face was seamed and thin. His lips hardly moved when he spoke.

"Elaine!" he said. His voice was like a little boy's. "Don't tell anybody you—" He took a deep breath and changed the subject. "I—lost my horse. That canoe—"

That was all. He slumped back again unconscious, with the hardness suddenly gone from his face. He lay there limp in the pool of bloody water bringing back to Elaine the sharp bitter and sweet memories of the past. She stared fascinated at him, horrified, thinking he had been through hell since he had last stopped by the mill less than a year ago—since he had kissed her in the moonlight and ridden away. She leaned closed to make sure that this really was Mark McCoy come back. She touched his damp shirt and felt the irregular beating of his heart.

Elaine suddenly came back to reality. This was awful. Mark had been reported outlawed. He had been reported dead. Elaine had thought he was dead—but now he was here and she had to hide him until he was well enough to go on. It did not occur to her that she would be breaking the law. She knew only that she had loved this man once and that she had to take care of him now.

Her first impulse was to see if she could stir up old Lemuel who helped her around the mill in the daytime and drank up his pay at night. But when she glanced again at Mark McCoy's quiet face she could not do this. He had asked her not to tell anybody, and even Lemuel might take a drink too many and let out the secret if she got him to help.

She made up her mind as she dragged the canoe higher on the banks. She went into the mill for the hand truck which was used for moving sacks of grain or meal. Elaine was a very strong girl for her size, but this unconscious man was in an awkward position and her struggle to get him out of the canoe almost resulted in failure. As a last resort she turned the canoe on its side so he rolled out onto the truck.

She hauled and heaved the truck onto the ramp leading into the big barnlike main room of the mill. Here she could move him no farther. Her living quarters were on the second floor of the mill building so she ran up the outside staircase to fetch down a pair of blankets. She rolled the outlaw off the truck onto one of the blankets. Then she placed a lighted candle on a box near by and went to work on him.

Very carefully she peeled off his shirt. A sob caught her throat. He had been shot twice in the chest, both shots ranging along his ribs on the right side, ripping open long gouges. He was still bleeding, and if she had not found him when she had he undoubtedly would have bled to death even if the canoe had not plunged over the dam.

Working skillfully with flour-sacking

bandage and disinfectant she had brought from upstairs she soon had him wrapped up in white. She washed his face. He seemed to smile as she did so. He seemed to stir a little, but he did not open his eyes.

Elaine turned away from him. She was shivering, shuddering with the reaction. She put the second blanket over him and blew out the candle. Then she went outside again to the stairs and the lake and the rush of water over the dam.

She pushed the canoe into the stream and watched it go over the spillway. She scuffed away the marks it had made in the sand. She jumped into the pond and swam fast and hard until the beating of her heart hurt her. Then she clambered onto the dam to lie on her back in the warm grass, looking up at the stars.

A YEAR ago it had been, and the moon was full of spring's first warmth. Mark McCoy had come down from his ranch in the hills above Brackett's. Mark was strong as an ox in those days, but quick on his feet and lithe as a mountain lion. In those days Mark McCoy often brought his guitar with him to sit on the dam with Elaine and sing endlessly of life and love. He would sing—and sometimes he would kiss her—and someday when the McC spread was really on its feet she would sell her mill to the first cash buyer and they would settle down in the hills to raise kids and horses.

But that night his kiss was hard, sharp, and there was no guitar or singing.

"Brackett foreclosed on me," he told her. "He cleaned me out. In another month I would have had enough horses broke for market. But that old son would not wait."

That night when the moon was full she had tried to tell him that it did not matter. But a couple of nights later it was learned that the safe in old Pete Brackett's bank had been blown and it was only natural to blame it on McCoy. McCoy disappeared: No one heard directly from him after that. But now he was back—and maybe he was dying.

Elaine sat up stiffly, clutching two fistsful of grass, perking her head to listen to the night sounds. She could hear nothing over the roar of the spillway but the distant clatter of hoofs on the road from Hill City. Something familiar in the cadence of it brought her to her feet. She peered toward the sound, followed it up to the roadhouse down-street from the mill.

She saw the flash of light as the door opened and a man stepped into the barroom. Then she walked silently and stiffly toward the hitchrack beside the drive leading to the loading platform of her mill.

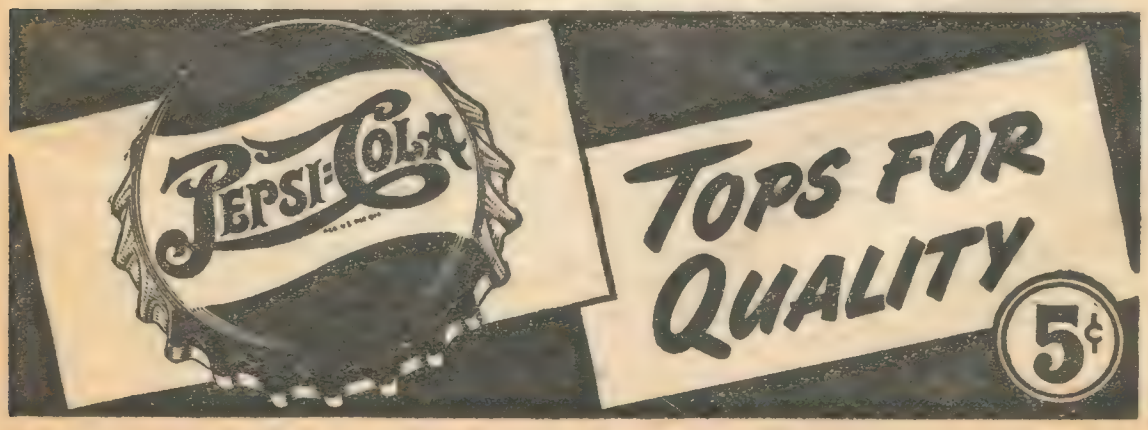
It startled her that she had done this without conscious thought. When Mark McCoy came sparking her she had met him here. Now she had come to meet another man who had come calling often after she believed Mark was dead.

In a couple minutes the tavern door spurted light again and the man momentarily blocked it as he passed through. He stepped into the saddle for the short ride to the mill as if he had forgotten how to walk. He came in with a ring of hoofs and a creak of leather. He saw her waiting there and reared to a halt.

"Elaine?" His voice was stiff.

"I came down to meet you," she said. "I happened to be out when you went into the tavern."

He swung from the saddle, jingling spur



chains. The horse snuffed at the dust. Hugh Fraser was tall, tall as the man she had found in the canoe. Once Hugh Fraser and Mark McCoy had been friends, as good friends as two men courting the same girl can ever be. Hugh had never mentioned Mark McCoy's name since the night old man Brackett's bank had been blown.

Now Hugh Fraser seemed moved with an undercurrent of excitement. It shook him a bit and made starlight dance on the five points of the star he wore on his spotted calf-skin vest. He lifted his big hands to Elaine's shoulders as if he was going to take her in his arms. He was startled when he made the contact. He gripped her soft shoulders with powerful fingers and shook her.

"You've been swimming again," he said. "I told you not to."

She thought how Mark McCoy would never give her orders.

"You're hurting me," she said, and twisted away from him.

The sheriff followed her up the outside stairway to the second floor of the mill. There Elaine had furnished a little living room when her father was still alive, two bedrooms and a wide kitchen. A hanging Rochester lamp shed a round glow on an old oak table, and picked out bright spots of color in the Mexican rugs and blankets.

Coming into this place always took the sheriff by the throat. It made the bareness of his own living quarters over at Hill City seem pitifully barren. Even with his hostess soaking wet, dressed in old shirt and pants, this was the sheriff's idea of home.

He was almost shy now as the girl stood stiffly before him, her dark eyes shadowed.

"Sorry," he said. "I get to worrying. I get to thinking you'll drown. Sometimes I can't think of anything else. Why don't you sell this place, kid, and—"

"I will," she said. "When—"

"When?" He shrugged. They had talked about all this too damn much already. "When I get an 'honest' job. When you're sure you're really in love with me. When —" His lips thinned. "You'll never tell me why you want me to quit being sheriff."

She laughed as if this would wipe out the implied question. Her laughter was tinged with mystery tonight that bothered him. Though he had not guessed it, she had good cause to worry about the possibility that he might someday cross gunfire with Mark McCoy. She could not bear that—but she could not talk about it either.

She moved away where the lampshade shadowed her. She could not cross from her mind tonight the pale, white face of the man downstairs in the big main room of the mill. She had an almost irresistible urge to go down to see how he was making out. But she knew she could never get past the sheriff without arousing his suspicion. She said quickly:

"I'll put on some coffee to boil, Hugh. Then I'll change. I'll be right back.

"Sure," he said.

HIS humor had improved. She ducked into the kitchen, opened the draft on the stove and put on the pot. When the sheriff came calling they often had coffee and little cakes she made. She decided to put on a dress tonight, a brightly printed cotton she had gotten from the mail order house; and all the time she was changing she kept thinking, thinking of the wounded man and of the sheriff. When she was ready the coffee had brewed. She loaded it, the cake, the cups and cream on a wooden tray and took them to the living room.

The sheriff was still standing where she had left him. He seemed preoccupied. But he smiled in appreciation when he saw her. "That's another thing we're going to do when we get married," he said. "We're going to throw away every pair of pants you own. Now—listen here, Kid—"

Mark McCoy had liked her in shirt and levis.

"No!" she stopped him. "When—" she added.

He shrugged. He knew how pigheaded she was. "It ain't right that anybody as pretty as you should be so good a cook, too, and have a business besides. It's hell."

"You think it proper for a feller handsome as you to go batting around the country all night?" she countered.

He shrugged. A hard crease cut across his forehead. "You got to sometimes," he said. "There was a train held up at Hill City Junction. Express messenger killed. Three men in the bunch and they headed

toward the river—down this way. Somebody's got to stop them."

Her heart turned cold as the rocks below the mill race. Her lips whitened with the pressure she put into them.

"Somebody," she said, terrified, "but not you."

She had cocked her head sidewise to identify a scraping noise from downstairs. Her heart beat a wild tattoo. A rustle of wind stirred through the willows outside the open windows and the sheriff's horse stamped with impatience at the hitchrack. Mingled with all this was the constant roar of the spillway.

"Maybe you're right, kid." He stood up. "I got to be moving. Going on to Brackett's tonight. Maybe those killers drifted down that way. The boys in the Tavern say they ain't seen any sign of the robbers, so I reckon they haven't passed through yet. See you later." He was talking as if hiding something.

The girl made a guess. "Brackett's?" She had noticed his hesitation and thought he had been about to say McCoy.

A faint flush tinged the sheriff's cheek. "Sure," he said. "On business. Strictly on business. I'm after those killers."

"Of course," Elaine said. She moved closer to him. He studied her quizically for a moment then took her into his arms. She fitted snugly into the embrace, warm and soft against his hardness, so natural he forgot the guilt that had touched him when she mentioned Brackett's.

Elaine remembered that the lovely Phoebe Brackett was back from school in the east and, curiously, this caused no feeling in her heart. Sheriff Hugh Fraser, even though he had blushed at the mention of the place, would not be going up there to see Phoebe.

As a matter of fact, it might be better if he were going up to spark the lovely blonde girl instead of riding to tell her father that Mark McCoy was headed this way and a gun-guard should be put out.

Now the sheriff tipped her head to kiss her. There was little passion in that kiss. It was more of a possesive friendliness as if they had been married for decades. He kissed her on the forehead and smiled down on her. She shivered with a lost ecstacy.

"Take care," she whispered.

"Sure—" he said—"for you."

This seemed a little too pointed for Elaine as if he was still arguing with her about Mark as he had years ago. Her dark eyes were sharp on him for a moment. Then she moved away. She went downstairs with him to see him aboard his horse. He leaned from the saddle to touch her cheek with a finger before trotting slowly off into the night. She stared after him.

But when the sound of hoofs had dwindled into nothing the storms began to build up in Elaine's heart. It stirred softly within her, then shook her like a giant wind. She wheeled suddenly and scurried into the mill.

There she froze, stiff and frightened. The wounded man had crawled away from his blankets. He was no where in sight.

CHAPTER TWO

The Angel

SHE found him behind sacks of fresh-smelling, new-ground cornmeal. Mark was unconscious, heavy with laxness, having passed out after his exertion. She could not move him from this place and she could not leave him here. He would be safe enough in the mill for the night; but come morning he would certainly be discovered. There was no place to hide in this big room that contained only stacked grain sacks, empty bags and the heavy machinery that moved the ponderous grindstones.

She had to take him some place and hide him or leave him here to be discovered when the place opened for business tomorrow.

Tonight something had happened to Elaine. All the indecision of the past year had been wiped out in a moment. She was not at all sure just how she would work it. She only knew that she would be able to make out somehow and that when Mark McCoy could move again she would go with him. This unacknowledged decision had a grip on Elaine. It dictated everything she should do.

She eased Mark into a better position and covered him with the blankets. Then she went outside again. This little settlement known as John's Mill consisted of only half a dozen buildings. The mill, itself, was the largest of these and the most

substantial. But the most popular place was the Tavern. There folks had a drink or two while waiting for their grain to be ground. There they gathered in all the gossip, and there they could stay the night if they wished.

Usually Elaine's right-hand man, Lemuel, could be found there in some state of insobriety.

She went after him now. She would have to take the chance that he would talk. The little barroom was practically empty. Haskin, the barkeep, was asleep behind the bar with head cradled in fat arms. Haskin's wife, the only other female at John's Mill, was apparently in bed. Two strangers were sitting at a round table trying to sell lightning rods to Lemuel who seemed on the verge of buying a couple sets.

"Maybe sometime I'll have a barn or something to put them on," Lemuel was drawling when the girl came into the room.

The strangers spotted her and their eyes widened. This was something to have suddenly appear out of the night. She smiled back briefly, devastatingly, and tapped Lemuel on the shoulder. Lemuel was old enough to be her father and he had a grey beard like a saint. But he was mortally terrified of her.

"Come on," she said. "You don't need a lightning rod. If lightning did strike you it wouldn't hurt you, and chances are it would shy off the second it got a whiff of your breath. Come along."

The strangers laughed.

"That's talkin'," one of them said.

"Why didn't you tell us you had a gal like that?" the other asked Lemuel, thinking Elaine was his daughter.

Lemuel shrugged and reached for the bottle on the table.

"No," the girl said.

Lemuel sighed deeply. He got unsteadily to his feet, bowed deeply to the strangers, tipped his hat. Weaving slightly he let Elaine guide him out of the Tavern. He stumbled along through the shallow dust that was always present on the road. When they stopped at the mill he aroused himself enough to ask what was up.

"You never went in there for me before," he said. "You know damn well it's too late to start in reforming me now."

"I don't want to reform you," she said sharply. "Come along."

He sobered in a flash when he saw the wounded man behind the stacked grain sacks. His almost colorless eyes took on light.

"McCoy!" he said. "The sheriff's lookin' for him."

"You can forget the sheriff," Elaine said shortly. "Give me a hand, Lemuel. And if you ever tell anybody he's up there, I'll personally beat the hell out of you."

The old man reluctantly helped her. They made a sort of stretcher from a couple poles and a blanket. To be sure that nobody saw them from the front of the mill they passed Mark through a window at the side, below the outside stairway. Then they scouted the whole neighborhood before carrying him upstairs. They laid him on the bed in the room that had belonged to Elaine's father.

Elaine was shivering from relief. Her lips trembled. Old Lemuel stared down at the man whose face was paper-white in the candlelight.

"It ain't my place to give you advice, Elaine," Lemuel said. "But a man was killed in that train robbery, the sheriff says —and Mark was recognized."

"Undress him," she said in a voice that hardly rose above a whisper. "Pa's nightshirt ought to fit him. You'll find it in the wardrobe. There's a bottle of whisky there, too," she said. "When you've fixed him up I'll give you a slug, a big slug."

She went into the kitchen and closed the door. There she sat, looking down through the window on the millpond, on the spillway, on the star-reflections sparkling there as if it were a second and smaller sky. She felt utterly exhausted and bewildered.

ELAINE could not sleep. Whenever McCoy turned in his bed she ran to him. He muttered sometimes in old delirium, sometimes he spoke aloud and the girl's heart would thump like a flat wheel on a freight car. Then he became quiet, and by dawn he was hot as a stove. He was burning up with gunshot fever.

There was no sense sending for a doctor. Elaine knew exactly what to do and she did it. She kept him covered, letting him sweat it out; and in the meanwhile she ran her mill downstairs, praying that the two great revolving stones would make enough clatter

to keep people from hearing Mark McCoy if he should start carrying on again.

By closing time she was nearly licked with worry. She stopped a moment beside Lemuel who was on the dam closing the sluice gates to stop the millwheel.. Lemuel had been having a hard time keeping his secret.

"Come upstairs before you get drunk tonight," she said.

"Sure," he said. "How's—"

She walked away from him, a slim but sturdy little figure in the waning sun. She climbed the staircase. There was a bit of breeze up here, cool with the approach of evening, ripe with the spring smells of the hills and pasture. Across the river a bunch of Brackett beef grazed toward water, and farther up half a dozen of the fat animals lazed in the shallows taking life easy. For just a moment Elaine envied them. Then she went swiftly to the room where her patient was waiting.

The fever had broken. Mark was awake, lying there on his back looking up at the ceiling. His eyes moved to her as she came in. His smile was hardly more than a twitch of the lips.

"So it ain't a dream after all," he said. "I thought maybe I'd dreamt you brought me up here."

"It isn't a dream," she said. "It's a nightmare. Want something to eat?"

"Nightmare?" He laughed at that. "Well, it's a dream to me, Elaine. I reckon I could eat something. What yuh got?"

"Soup," she said. "The way you been carrying on you couldn't eat anything else."

"Soup?" he said, a cloud passing over his eyes. "I ain't had soup since I was a little kid." He glanced up at her. "What do you mean, carrying on?"

"You had a fever," she said. "You kept mumbling things and hollering. You asked me not to tell anybody you were here—then you started on telling everyone yourself."

He did not seem to care very much. He was still too sick to worry. He lay in the bed just staring at Elaine, feasting on her beauty. Then his eyes moved from her.

"Your old man's room," he said. "I remember it. This is where he died. He was a great guy, your old man was." The outlaw smiled wanely. "But I'm not going to die here."

Tears were close to Elaine's eyes. She went up to him and touched his forehead. He was cool now. He caught her hand and clung to it.

"I didn't bust old Brackett's bank," he whispered to her. "But I found out who did. It took me a long time, but I found out."

"Who?" she asked swiftly.

"Two other fellers," he said. His eyes lifted to Elaine. "I'm starved. How about that soup?"

"What other fellers?" she demanded.

"You don't know them," he said. "You never even heard of them."

A flash of anger surged through her at this evasion.

"What about that train robbery?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh—I was there," he admitted as if it were nothing at all. "Then as she reared back startled he drew her hand to his lips and softly kissed her fingers. She jumped away from him.

"I'll get you something to eat," she said.

She hurried to the kitchen feeling completely frustrated and there Lemuel was waiting for her. Lemuel was still wearing that wise, in-the-know expression. Somehow it annoyed her frightfully.

"See if he wants you to give him a hand—or anything," she snapped. "Go on in there, Lemuel."

Lemuel shuffled across the floor.

AFTER she sent the soup in to Mark McCoy Elaine went down to the mill pond for a swim. Kicking around in the water always made her feel better. It seemed to clean up her mind as well as cool off her body. It made it possible for her to think in a straight line. And tonight that line of thinking led her directly to Mexico. Old Pete Brackett had always wanted her mill. He would pay plenty for it. With what she got she could go to Mexico and set up a little ranch. Mark McCoy could go with her and start out afresh.

This all seemed so reasonable to Elaine she was not even aware that the plan was practically an impossibility. Selling the mill was the easiest item. Moving Mark would be the hardest. She could hardly hope to keep Lemuel quiet or the sheriff away until Mark was well enough to sneak

out. Sooner or later it would be discovered that she was hiding a man in her house. Besides Mark had never said he wanted to go to Mexico with her. He had only kissed her on the back of her hand.

But Elaine ignored these stumbling blocks as she gently swam around the millpond. When she climbed out onto the dam to let the sun dry her she noticed that the two strangers she had seen in the Tavern last night had apparently been standing near the sluiceway watching her.

The tall, lean one who claimed to be a lightning rod salesman smiled broadly upon her. "You sure can swim like a fish," he said. "Where's your old man—around somewhere?"

He was referring to Lemuel who he apparently still thought was Elaine's father. His dark eyes were set on Elaine's, curiously cold.

"He doesn't need any lightning rods," Elaine said. "We've got plenty on the old mill as it is."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Just thought we'd see if he wanted to join us in a game of poker or something."

"I'll ask him," Elaine said.

The men were at the end of the dam between Elaine and the mill, blocking her path in a negligent way.

"Don't bother," the taller man said. "I'll just run up and ask him."

He turned toward the outside stairway. Elaine was swept with terror. She ran toward him but the shorter man stepped into her path. He was looking at the workings of the sluiceway and he did this as if it was a complete accident. When she tried to get around him he stepped back, tipping his hat to her, and blocking her path more than before.

"Gosh, Miss," he said. "I'm sorry, I beg your pardon, Miss. I just wasn't looking."

Frantically she smiled at him. "Oh, that's all right. Think nothing of it."

The tall man was already half way up the stairs, climbing them casually. She could never stop him, and she knew instinctively now that he was looking for Mark McCoy. All she could do was pray that he did not find him.

"You got a nice place here, Miss," the shorter man was trying to engage her in conversation.

"Very," she said.

It was too late now. Lemuel had gone over to the tavern for a beer at noon and she wondered if he had talked. The tall man was at the top of the stairs, at the little square landing there. Elaine stared, fascinated, frozen. Then she heard Lemuel's voice from inside the kitchen.

"Lookin' for me, Stranger?"

"Nice and cool up here," the tall man said. "Cooler than in the bar. I kinda thought we might get up a little game of poker."

His hand was on the doorlatch. Elaine felt the blood pounding behind her ears, the pressure of it blinding her.

The second man was talking again. "You close the gates at night, huh? Sort of saves up water for the next day. That the idea?"

"That's the idea," Elaine admitted, "when the water's low. Which it isn't just now." Lemuel was still trying to stall off the tall man at the kitchen door. Elaine lifted her head. Her heart was fluttering like a young bird learning to fly. "Well—I'll have to go, Mister," she said with forced brightness. "I'm expecting the sheriff tonight. He's my boy friend."

"Met him the other night," the man said without a quiver. "Nice feller." He laughed. "Was lookin' for a bunch of train robbers. Reckon you worry about him sometimes, don't you?"

"Sometimes," she admitted. The man had moved out of her way. Her shot in the dark, mentioning the sheriff had completely missed the target. She went on, trying not to obviously hurry toward the stairway. She heard Lemuel again.

"That's a good idea, Stranger. I'd kinda like to wet my whistle first, though. There ain't nothin' up here to drink and Elaine don't allow it in the house. So I sorta reckon—"

He was dragging it out. Elaine reached the stairs and ran up them lithe as a cougar in her bare feet. She ducked past the tall man who still stood on the landing.

"Gotta dress," she muttered.

She grabbed a towel from a rack in the kitchen and stepped into the room where McCoy was lying. She closed the door quietly behind her. She thought Mark's face was paler than it had been the night before; his lips were almost colorless. She knew for sure now that these men were

after him, and she suspected that he had recognized the voice of the tall one. She had no idea how they had found out that he was here. But she knew that they would come back—and keep on coming back—until they got him. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Unexpected Visitors

THE screen door to the stair-landing banged like a gun going off. Both Elaine and Mark started at the sound. Then the stairs creaked as men descended. Slowly Elaine and Mark turned to look at each other. Mark McCoy was beginning to smile. Elaine was too terrified.

"Damn it!" he said. "You sure are pretty in a bathing suit. You're pretty in anything, reckon."

"Who was that hombre?" She ignored his compliment.

"Tall—sharp face—?"

She nodded. Every vestige of a smile left McCoy's face.

"Traveling with a short feller who likes to talk?"

She nodded again.

"Slim Willie Hicks," he said slowly. "Chatty Johnson. The three of us held up that train. Willie shot the express messenger."

Elaine went to her knees beside the bed. There was a great wall between the two of them. He talked about that train robbery as if it were an everyday occurrence with him. Yet she could not accept in her heart that he was really a bandit, a partner of those two men.

"You made that up," she said. "You've still got gunshot fever. You never robbed any train."

His eyes brightened. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks for saying that, Elaine."

He reached for her, and she went into his arms quite naturally as he kissed her full on the lips. Sick as he had been and thin she could feel the latent strength in him. She forgot all about the sheriff while Mark McCoy kissed her. She forgot everything except that he was back again and that she loved him even more now than she had when he had left in such a hurry a year ago. She forgot all about those long months while she tried to forget him, while she thought he was dead, while she tried to open her heart so the sheriff could take his place.

"Hicks will be back," he whispered after a while. "I lost my gun someplace. I got to have a gun, Elaine."

She moved away from him, keeling beside the bed while salt tears trickled down her cheeks. Then she glanced at him and her heart was twisted because he had mentioned Hicks while kissing her. She got up slowly.

"I'll fetch you Pa's gun," she said.

She went to the chest at the foot of the bed and dug up her father's old Peacemaker Colt .45. She had taken good care of it since her father died, oiling it, polishing it. She wished she had fresh cartridges. There was no telling how good these would be or how many would hang fire.

She brought it to him. His eyes brightened as he took the gun. His fingers moved over it in a caress. Jealousy struck her. It was queer being jealous of a gun. But by the way he touched it she felt that he must love it even more than he did her. Suddenly he shuddered.

"I got to kill those two," he said. "When they try to get in here again—don't keep them away."

Elaine stared at him in horror. He was in no physical shape to face a couple of healthy gunmen. She thought the fever had touched his mind. She fought to steady her voice.

"I'll send them an engraved invitation," she said. "Murder tonight. Please bring your own guns. Present this card at the door for admission."

"That's the idea," he said without humor.

Then Elaine broke down. She went on her knees again beside him, pleading with him, her eyes wide and dark with their begging. "Forget them, please, Mark. I'll sell the mill. Pete Brackett's wanted it for years. We can go to Mexico. We can start out fresh down there." This was what she had dreamed while swimming in the pond. She was making it into reality now.

"I ought to say 'yes,'" he whispered. "But I can't. I have to have it out with those two hombres. I have to clean up my name."

Elaine bit her lower lip until it hurt. She took a deep, steadying breath. She did not

really understand why it was necessary for him to fight with those two strangers. But she said:

"Of course—Mark."

She kissed him swiftly then and left the room.

FOR years it had been Elaine's habit to listen through the night sounds for the throb of hoofs on the prairie. Once it had been Mark McCoy for whom she waited. But now Mark was sleeping in her father's bedroom, sleeping silently. Then later, after Mark had gone away to disgrace, she had learned to listen for the sheriff.

But tonight she was not listening for anything at all when the old familiar sound came through the roar of the spillway. There was more than one rider, coming from the direction of Brackett's. They were coming at a long, easy lope.

Panic struck Elaine's heart again. She had not expected the sheriff back so soon, and if he came to her kitchen for the usual coffee and cakes there was every chance that he would discover Mark McCoy in her father's room. Though Mark was quiet now he might start talking in his sleep as he had last night—and there would be hell to pay.

She quickly blew out the lamp and ran down stairs. She hesitated there making up her mind, then cut around the corner of the mill to the loading platform near the hitchracks. She hoisted herself up to sit there banging her heels against the wall. She tried to appear quite nonchalant about this as if it were only natural for her to be out there taking the air.

Hoofs clattered on the bridge and riders swept into the drive. There were two of them. Even in the darkness Elaine was quick to recognize the sheriff and old Pete Brackett's very lovely daughter, Phoebe. Phoebe was laughing lightly, happily. When her horse halted by the rack Phoebe pushed her hat back so her long yellow curls would dance free. She waited in the saddle for the sheriff to dismount and come over to hold her stirrup.

Then Phoebe, still laughing, practically fell out of the saddle so the sheriff had to lift his hands to catch her.

Watching this, though unseen, Elaine felt a distinct grip at her throat. Then the danger of the presence of this pair struck her and gnawing fear was with her again. She tried to distract them.

"Hi—kids!" she called. "I thought you were man-hunting, Sheriff, not tracking down blondes."

Every tone of her voice was false and the two new arrivals must have noticed it. They sprang apart guiltily, wheeled to face the voice from the darkness. When they saw Elaine there on the platform they came over to her. Elaine laughed and pulled the same trick Phoebe had used on the sheriff. Elaine slid off the loading platform right into his arms. He held her for a moment completely startled.

"My gosh," he said. "Seems I can't turn around without some woman landing on me."

"It's because you're so handsomely masculine," Elaine said, beating Phoebe to it. "The girls can't help it. Even Phoebe. How's the hunting, Phoebe?"

"It *was* good," Phoebe said unruffled. "Well, Hugie, will you get my stuff down?"

"Glad to," the sheriff said.

Elaine had stepped out of his arms almost as quickly as she had fallen into them. It was queer how Mark's coming back had made such a tremendous difference in her. When she had thought he was lost forever she had gotten a certain comfort from Hugh Fraser. Now it was as if he was a stranger —or even somebody she did not like. If he had noticed this he made no sign. It seemed that he was preoccupied with his man-hunt—or with Phoebe Brackett.

He went to the horses. Phoebe was still smiling brightly.

"I got kind of fed up out there at the ranch," she said. "Nothing but men. Then Hugie came by. It was his idea. I thought I'd come and spend a couple days with you, Elaine."

Phoebe Brackett had done this before. Long ago the girls had swapped open invitations to visit the mill or ranch at any time. But for Elaine this was the worst thing possible just now. She could not even keep them off by pretending to have smallpox or something because a moment ago she had been in the sheriff's arms. She had no way at all of keeping them out aside from physical force, and that would be as bad as announcing that Mark McCoy was hiding in

her house. Elaine was too completely lost to even think of a stalling maneuvre.

"Aren't you glad?" Phoebe Brackett asked.

"Of course," Elaine gasped. "It's wonderful. It's only I was so surprised."

The sheriff had returned carrying Phoebe's beautifully-tooled saddlebags. By the bulge in each Elaine estimated Phoebe intended staying several days. Frantically she tried to think of something.

It was no use.

"Come along," the sheriff said.

They went around the corner and up the stairs. The sheriff headed for the room where Mark McCoy slept.

At the last instant Elaine had a very feeble inspiration. "Hugh—I found a rathole in there. They have a nest under the floor. We spread poison all over in that room and— Well, Phoebe can have my room. I'll sleep here in the kitchen."

The sheriff stared intently at her. In a moment he turned away from the first bedroom door and went on to the second. Elaine, white, kept her face out of the lamplight. Her rat story appeared to have won the field momentarily. Nor was it an unlikely tale at all, for there is a steady battle with rats and mice in every grist mill.

"I'll cook some coffee," Elaine said weakly. "It's good to see you, Phoebe."

Phoebe's blue eyes had a quizzical twist to the corners. The sheriff came back, and Elaine thought he was walking with unusual quietness.

"Reckon I'll put the horses up," he said, "and drop over to the Tavern for a minute. I'll be right back."

"We'll wait up," Elaine said without enthusiasm.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spellbound Cupid

ELAINE felt as if she had been mesmerized. She was going through certain motions but her mind and heart were not in them. She was listening stiffly, endlessly for some sound to give away the fact that Mark McCoy was hidden here. She would, of course, blame any noise on the "rats." But she knew she could not get away with it during a long visit.

Phoebe stepped out a minute to wash up, changing from her riding habit into a plain cotton dress that would be more comfortable and appropriate. It was a blue that matched her eyes with a trimming of gold to set off her soft hair. She was lovely as a dream in that outfit and Elaine had to admit it.

"Get that in the States?" she asked.

"Made it," Phoebe said. "It's a funny thing—when I first came back from school I thought I'd die of boredom. Now I don't want to go to college any more. And I won't."

"Why—I thought you liked it there," Elaine said, her mind less than half on the conversation.

"I did," Phoebe admitted. "But I've had enough. I'm going to catch a man and settle down to ranching."

"Got your hero picked out?"

"Sure," Phoebe said. "Gentleman I met recently." Elaine was not actually paying attention to Phoebe. Her jumpy nerves had control of her now. Between listening for Mark McCoy and for the sheriff's return she had little concentration left. What there was of it was devoted chiefly to worry about Slim Willie Hicks and his talkative friend. But Phoebe went on.

Suddenly it occurred to Elaine that Phoebe was not only chattering. Phoebe was working up a proposition with a directness unusual for her.

"This gentleman was telling me about himself," Phoebe continued. "He's been trying to marry a girl for a long time. First she was in love with another man, but when this one disappeared my gentleman friend still could not make any headway. The girl he wanted to marry did not like his job—or the weather—or anything, much, apparently. Anyway—I like this man and I'm going to marry him."

The kitchen was so quiet after that speech Elaine could hear the flutter of the round flame in the Rochester lamp and the gentle bumping of water in the coffee pot. Stiffly she rose to take the pot from the fire and set it on a brightly-dyed grass mat on the table. She poured two cups of coffee, pushed one across to Phoebe and moved sugar and cream closer to her guest.

She was looking straight into Phoebe's eyes when the bed creaked in her father's room. Phoebe blinked.

"Sounds like the rats," Elaine said breathlessly.

Phoebe shrugged her gracious shoulders. "I hope you've spread the poison thick," she said.

"I have," Elaine said.

"That's good," Phoebe said. Phoebe had Elaine pinned down there across the table. "Say—" she went on. "I've got some news. The sheriff and I went out to Mark McCoy's old place. Somebody's been there—gunfighting by the looks. Somebody's also been digging holes all around the place as if looking for buried treasure. Later on one of my cowboys brought in Mark's horse.

There was blood on the horn and on the horse's mane. Father recognized the saddle."

She said it all very quietly. When she had finished her clear cheeks were bright with pinkness. Then Mark McCoy groaned in his sleep, and the bed creaked in loud protest.

"Your father's bed must be full of rats," Phoebe said.

Elaine was trapped. She felt somehow that Phoebe was trying to blackmail her. She knew that Phoebe had been referring to the sheriff when talking about her "gentleman."

Elaine said: "The sheriff would marry me tonight if I said yes."

"But you won't say it," Phoebe said coldly.

"It depends," Elaine said.

Then Elaine flung herself away from the table. She felt that she would break up like a china doll. She had made a trade with Phoebe. If Phoebe would not give away the fact of Mark's presence here, she would let Phoebe go to work on the sheriff. It was an unspoken trade—but it was made, and both girls understood it. Phoebe began to smile easily. She sipped her coffee. Elaine crossed the kitchen to the doorway to gulp at the night air.

Below she saw the sheriff coming toward the mill with old Lemuel. Lemuel was so drunk he could hardly keep his feet. She watched the sheriff carry her hired hand into the mill room below. After a while he came up the stairs. He passed Elaine without seeing her. He crossed over and sat heavily in the chair Elaine had so recently vacated.

"You were right," he said to Phoebe.

Phoebe vigorously shook her dancing yellow curls.

"No!" she insisted. "I was wrong." She laughed nervously. "You know, Elaine, I was telling you about Mark." Elaine's heart stopped beating. Was Phoebe going to cross her up after all? "I remembered how he had been a good friend of yours," Phoebe went on evenly. "Well, I told Hugie I bet he would come down here if he was wounded. I bet he would crawl or swim. But I'm so relieved he did not come at all."

She was carrying out her part of the unvoiced agreement. Elaine was numb. Old Lemuel had not been able to keep his secret. The sheriff glanced up at Elaine but his eyes could not hold steady.

"That's good to know," he said to Elaine though he was answering Phoebe. "I got the impression over to the Tavern that McCoy was hiding out here somewhere. Well—" He seemed either very tired or sick. "I'm glad he isn't." A smile tugged at his lips. He sighed profoundly. "That coffee smells good, Elaine. How about pouring a man a cup."

"Sure," Elaine said. She went to the cupboard for a cup and saucer, and her tenseness was such she felt as if she was

wading up to her neck in liquid mud. "I made some of those little cakes. Sheriff," she offered. "I'll get some of them for you."

Fervently she prayed for quiet in her father's room.

THIS strange little gathering became more and more eerie. Downstairs old Lemuel was snoring in perfect peace after spilling his story to the sheriff. Up here the two girls and the lawman continued to build their structure of pretense. The sheriff knew all about the "rats" in the bedroom, but was going to do nothing about it. Elaine was sure of this as they talked of other things. Phoebe mentioned the Mill. She asked Elaine how she had been making out since her father died.

Elaine shrugged. "Okay," she said. "I've got some money in the old sock. But this is no business for a girl. I've been thinking lately of riding out to see if your father wants to buy it."

The sheriff's eyes brightened. He had always wanted her to sell out. He looked upon this as an indication that she intended to settle with him now. Phoebe's face lighted up eagerly. This indicated to her that Elaine intended carrying out her share of the unspoken bargain by moving away soon. With Elaine gone Phoebe would have a better chance of catching the sheriff. She said quickly:

"I'm sure father would want to buy your mill. He's always said he needed it to round out his holdings. He's always talking about it. He say's you are just as mule-headed as your father, though, and never would sell."

That brought a laugh. For a moment they were relieved of the sharp edge of tenseness that had been cutting at their nerves.

"What do you figure on doing then, Elaine?" asked the sheriff.

"Don't know," Elaine said. "Depends. It depends on too many things."

The sheriff's voice went hoarse. "If I told you—" he hesitated—"that I was going to resign my job tomorrow . . . would that make any difference?"

Elaine glanced wildly at Phoebe. Phoebe seemed distressed, but was trying to hide it.

"I guess it would make a difference," Elaine said. "Uh—you want some more coffee, Hugh?"

"Guess not," he said.

He seemed relieved. He seemed happier than Elaine could remember him being in a long time. He thought she was accepting him, and she hated herself for letting him think this. She wanted to speak right out to him and tell him she loved Mark McCoy.

But she could not do that thing because then he might change. He might stop ignoring the fact that the outlaw was under his same roof. She hated leading him on, too, because Phoebe might construe it to mean Elaine was not remaining faithful to their agreement.

The sheriff pushed back a chair. It scratched on the floor, bringing a shiver to Elaine's spine.

"I'll be riding," he said. If I get going now I can reach Hill City by morning. I can be back by tomorrow night."

Elaine went with him to the door. Phoebe, grimly silent sat stiffly in her chair as if she had been betrayed. Elaine was terrified that she would speak up; and if once the truth was mentioned aloud it would no longer be possible for these people to pretend that it did not exist. If Phoebe spoke up the whole tragedy would blow up on them.

The sheriff pulled Elaine onto the steps with him. His spur chains were tingling with his nervousness.

"Damn it, kid," he whispered to Elaine. "I can't think—tomorrow—"

The words jambed up. He tipped her head back so he could look into her face. Then he kissed her. Though she hated it, though she hated herself, though she felt like a Judas, she kissed him back. She was doing everything for Mark McCoy—she could do this for him, too.

"Hurry back," she whispered to the sheriff feeling more like a traitor than ever.

"Pronto!" he promised.

He was smiling broadly now, crushing her in his arms, and she was glimpsing from the corner of her eyes a slow change in Phoebe. Phoebe was chewing her lower lip. Suddenly decision came to her eyes and she got up from the table.

At that instant a man poked a pistol into the sheriff's ribs. Nobody had noticed him there on the stairway, nor his partner down below. They had been too busy with the clash of their own emotions to keep up a normal guard.

"Sorry to bust this up," Slim Willie Hicks said in his oiled voice. "Get back inside, Tinstar. If you don't, I'll blast a hole in your belly big enough to shove your girlfriend through."

With his left hand Slim Willie took the sheriff's pistol.

LIM WILLIE wore a mask. So did Chatty Johnson when he appeared at the top of the stairs. Chatty would rather talk than commit murder, and he would rather murder than eat. "Everything's clear," he said. "I got the horses ready. I'll watch these guys and gals, Pal, while you put the heat on the punk in the backroom. Lucky that lovely black-haired filly kept the stove going, huh?"

"Some day I'll shove a dictionary down your throat to shut you up," Hicks threatened. "Okay. Take 'em over."

Chatty lined them up against the wall, with their backs to him, helpless. The tall man poked about the stove. Chatty could not keep his mouth shut.

"He's a double-crosser, that hombre in the back room. He double-crossed his best pals. We was good as father and mother to him and he double-crossed us," Chatty went on blithely. "He's goin' to get only a smidgeon of what he deserves."

"Pipe down," Hicks said wearily.

It came to Elaine with a terrific impact what they were going to do. Mention of the stove, sounds of poking in the coals, mention of the double-cross, all added up to one thing. Phoebe's comment on the fight at McCoy's place and the holes dug all around told her the rest. Apparently Mark McCoy had gotten away with the loot of the train robbery. These men had been trailing him down to get it back. Now they were here and they were going to torture him if necessary.

Elaine could follow Hicks' movements after that by familiar creakings of the floor. He crossed the kitchen, taking with him the smell of hot iron. He stopped beyond a loose board near the door to the little hall leading to the two bedrooms and the front parlor that was so seldom used.

"You better come with me," he said. "You with the black hair."

Elaine turned slowly, dark eyes full of terror. Hicks had his gun ready in his right hand. In his left he carried the stove poker that smoked faintly.

"Mack's kinda a rugged hombre," Hicks said. "Maybe you're not so rugged. Maybe you can persuade him to talk."

Elaine dragged herself across the kitchen. She got to the table. She was trying to summon the strength to pass it when a door creaked down the hall. Hicks wheeled. Standing there in the hallway, like a ghost, in her father's old night-shirt, was Mark McCoy. He had not the strength to hold up the Frontier Colt. He had to brace himself against the wall to keep from falling.

"I'll tell you where the loot is, Hicks," he said in a strangely strong voice. "There's a big pecan tree up there where I used to run my spread. It's got my initials on it inside a heart. Other initials, too. E. L. Elaine Lee. Long time ago. Well, if you spit over the lowest limb from the south side where it lands is the stuff."

His announcement was followed by a frozen silence. Hicks was trying to decide whether or not he was telling the truth. Hicks apparently decided in Mark's favor.

"Well'll take this Elaine filly with us," Hicks said slowly. "You better not be fooling us."

"It's there," McCoy said. He was smiling, almost laughing. "I figured on turning it over to the railroad when I had no further use for it—but I guess I didn't quite make out. You know the tree, Sheriff?"

A gun barked. The bullet got Mark McCoy somewhere in the chest. It knocked him back against the wall. It brought a scream from deep within Elaine and she leaped past the table at Slim Willie Hicks who had so cold-bloodedly shot down McCoy.

She drove into him hard. She fought him with such a vicious cat-like fury she did not know what else was going on in the room. She clawed and scratched. Then she heard a voice, clear as a bell.

"Back off, Elaine."

It was McCoy. He had not been killed by that one shot. Elaine swung away from Slim Willie Hicks. She saw McCoy sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall of the hallway. His knee was bare and thin for the nightshirt had slipped past it, and on his knee he had braced the long barrel of the .45 Colt. She saw a flame jut from it.

(Please continue on page 98)

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

FRUIT FRITTERS

are a tasty dessert which does not require the use of an oven. Thoroughly mix one cup of sifted flour with a quarter of a teaspoon of salt and a teaspoon and a half of baking powder. Add and blend three tablespoons of sugar, then slowly mix in a third of a cup of milk. When smooth, beat an egg and add to this mixture. Dip fruit into the batter and fry in shallow fat or oil until delicately brown. Slices of peeled apple, banana slices or fully drained peach, pear or pineapple slices are the best fruits to choose from. If you wish a really fancy dessert, serve the fritters with a sauce. This can be a thin custard sauce or one made from fruit juice.

STALE BREAD

is the basis for many dishes and should be carefully kept. Not only is it of use in any number of puddings but for meat loaves and as crumbs for various fried dishes, or to top baked macaroni or noodles. Then it is useful for all the variations of French Toast. Recently I had some in a camp that I thought especially tempting. Better if the slices are not too hard. First make the batter. Mix a tablespoon of sugar with half the amount of flour, and a quarter of a teaspoon each of cinnamon and nutmeg. Add one egg and beat until smooth, then gradually stir in half a cup of milk. Dip the bread slices into this batter and fry to a golden brown in shallow fat or vegetable shortening. When done, spread lightly with honey and set in the oven for five minutes.

ADORABLE WITCH of the NORTHLAND

By Anthony Alger

AMY sighed as she fitted the edges of yellow satin together and drew her needle through the seam. Eliza Douglas, perched on the four-poster bed, never took her eyes off her for a minute. But it was Eliza's room she was sharing and she couldn't do anything about it.

Amy Thorne and her brother Lex had arrived at Fort Vancouver only the day before. Amy was sewing up rents and freshening the costumes they would wear in their show that night. Just the two of them to entertain for a whole evening, but they had been welcomed, and at their last stop a good bit of money had fallen into Lex's three-cornered hat.

The Thornes hadn't come to the Fort in very grand style. They had been rowed up in an Indian canoe, with all the grime of travel upon them. Amy didn't know how common it was for travellers to arrive in that fashion, even on foot and in rags, or she would have felt less humble.

Beside her, Eliza looked an ill-mannered child. Yet there was only a few years between them, but years of "advantages" such as Eliza realized she would never have.

Amy was young, too, and very attractive. If a tinge of weariness shadowed her good looks by day, when night came she was all life and charm. She had a pointed chin and odd corners to her jaws. She was small and slender and black haired, but her eyes were of a peculiar light color that most people called green. At times they seemed to be seeing things nobody else could see. The face of a witch, if one could imagine a witch being so young and lovely.

She could not have come across anyone more different from herself than Eliza Douglas, who had grown up in the Oregon Country, the daughter of a Hudson's Bay trader and his Indian wife. Eliza looked her Scottish blood, and only the copperish tinge to her skin came from her mother. Her hair was thick and straight like an Indian's too, but it was a muddy sort of light brown, and her eyes were blue. She was sturdy, and by comparison with Amy she looked stolid.

"Lex Thorne is your brother, you say? Not your husband?"

Amy had met that question before. "Yes, he's my brother."

"All the other men I've ever heard of leave their sisters at home. And their wives, too, unless they are part Indian and can cope with the life here. Why, even to cross the mountains is more than a white girl can stand. And you don't look strong enough to bend a sapling."

"We came by boat. Around the Horn. By way of the Sandwich Islands."

"Oh," said Eliza. "And where is your boat? Where did you land?"

"It was wrecked on the bar—at the mouth of the Columbia. We were rescued by some Indians. They helped us to get off a few things. We stayed at their village for a while."

Eliza was having the time of her life. "And you are really actor folks?"

Exotic, green-eyed Amy was under suspicion of being a witch—because her loveliness dazzled the young men of old Fort Vancouver.

Amy stopped still, watching them. . . .

"We are," said Amy, smiling.

"We've never had any actors here. I've read about them—they're strange. They don't even use their real names. Is that so?"

"It often is."

"What are your real names?" asked Eliza, with the directness of an untutored child.

"They're just ordinary and tiresome," said Amy, with assumed indifference.

Somehow she put Eliza in her place. Then Eliza asked, "That's real silk you're working on, isn't it? You make me feel like a piece of homespun. Oh, dear, there's nothing romantic about me at all."

Amy's portmanteau stood open at her feet. In it in plain sight lay a gold-embossed volume.

"My, what a pretty book!" Eliza bounded off the bed. "May I see it?" Her Scottish father had encouraged her to borrow books from the doctor's library, and they were her only outlet to the world.

Amy answered without looking up: "It's by the new poet, Nathaniel Willis."

Eliza was leafing through it. "And it's yours?"

"My brother gave it to me on my birthday."

Eliza's lips pressed in upon each other. She looked narrowly at Amy and then out into the big yard of the compound, where a tall figure in a long black cloak was pacing up and down. It was Dr. McLoughlin. Amy glanced up and saw him, too, and thought he must be weighed down just then with the cares of governing the West.

Eliza slipped out of the room, and at first Amy was relieved. Mrs. Douglas had been kind to give her house-room, but this half-baked daughter of hers was trying. Amy noticed that Eliza fell into step with the doctor, and still thought nothing of it until she saw that the girl was holding out for his inspection the fly-leaf of the Willis book.

There was a tell-tale inscription on that page. Why had she been so careless as not to tear it out? She could see what was written there as plainly as if it was being held before her own eyes. "Mary Ann Thompson on her twentieth birthday from her loving brother Alexander." What would the governor think?

She saw him hand the book back, and he didn't look disturbed. Amy had been impressed by his dignity and his serious face. He hadn't seemed to mind the arrival of the Thorne pair with their unheard of request to put on an entertainment. He didn't seem to be any more ruffled now. Actor folks, what did they amount to? Who cared what they called themselves—stretching and straining for pretty names that people would remember?

Amy had a dark-red silk dress. It had soon been made ready. She had more trouble with Lex's costume. The last time he had used it he had split his yellow satin breeches. Luckily she could insert a scrap she had kept. His deep-blue satin coat was also in need of repair. One of the sleeves had ripped half out. It must be that Lex was getting heavier. She would have to try it on him before she would know what to do with it.

He was quartered with the bachelor traders. Amy took the coat over her arm and started across the grounds. Lex had complained sometimes that it would have been easier if she had been his wife, then there wouldn't be all this inconvenience of separate rooms. Indeed, Lex had been irritable about a lot of things lately.

She didn't find her brother, but she ran into Charles Goodpasture, a young trader who had escorted them yesterday from the landing to Governor McLoughlin's house. Charles was tall and bony and his face looked craggy. His hair was sandy, and his skin was browned by the weather. In his woods' dress of leggins and brown jumper he looked something like a cinnamon bear, if one could imagine a bear's being so long.

"Your brother is out hunting with some of the men," he told her.

"I can wait," said Amy. She reflected that she should be good at waiting by this time.

She turned back and Charles walked with her.

"Do you know you're the first strolling players who have ever come by?"

"So Eliza was telling me."

"One wonders about you a little."

She had liked Charles from the first. But was he going to start in on her as Eliza had done? "I don't blame you," she returned. "But we'll do our best to amuse you while we're here."

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Boston."

"Lex told me about the wreck. Also Eliza did. You were lucky you didn't perish." His clear blue eyes lingered over her as if he felt it would have been a particular disaster if she had been lost.

They came to the main building and he asked if she would like to look at the banquet hall, where they were to have the entertainment. "And the doctor's quarters are worth seeing," he added.

"He must be many men in one. I've heard him called Doctor John, chief factor, Governor McLoughlin. What else?"

"He's all of that," said Charles, and showed her through any rooms that weren't occupied at the moment.

It was amazing to find so many articles of a civilized life. Besides books, there were paintings and sketches by visiting artists and scientists. The walls were hung with skins and trophies.

THE two lingered. Amy was conscious that Charles was looking at her more than at the things he showed her. Probably a white woman was rare in his life. She mustn't make too much of the way he hung upon the least word she said. It was a pleasure to meet his magnetic blue eyes, but they drew her too strongly. It wasn't modest for a young lady of that day to look so long into a man's face.

They were interrupted by Lex. "The house-servant told me you had a pretty coat for me," he said.

Lex Thorne was slight and only moderately tall. His hair was mouse-colored, rather long and very straight. His eyes were of a grayish brown and shifted with restless lights. His thin, nervous hands were never still.

"Oh, yes," said Amy, as Charles went about his business, and slipped it on him.

"You could get that fellow," said Lex. "Might be a good idea."

Amy gave a tug at the blue-satin lapels. "But what would you do?" she asked idly. She would have to let a seam out.

"I'd have more freedom alone. You know that."

Tears blurred her eyes as she eased the coat off. "How could you put on a show alone?"

"There's better things out here than show business."

"But you said—"

"Any way to get out of Boston was good enough, wasn't it? But when you go adventuring you don't muff anything that comes along."

"But the show this evening, Lex. We ought to slip away somewhere and practice. It's been days."

"Oh, I suppose so. What a nuisance. You need it more than I do."

She knew that wasn't so, but she said nothing. It was true that Lex was better at bluffing his way through than she was.

"There's a nice clump of firs out back of the orchard," he said. "Bring the guitar out there after the noon meal—what do they call it here, dinner?"

The woman ate separately. At noon the men, being busy, finished more quickly than the woman. They took their leisure at night, whereas the women lengthened the luncheon hour with relaxation and gossip.

Amy sat down with twelve others, so that there was a little flurry about there being thirteen at table. But that passed because they had Amy Thorne to think about.

All were dark skinned, and except for Eliza Douglas, there wasn't a blue eye among them. That was because of their Indian blood. Indian servants waited on them, and Amy had never seen such quantities of food. It tasted particularly good after the scant fare of the past months.

"Well, we've had all sorts pass through the Fort," one of the older women remarked, as if to say that show-people could be taken with the rest.

"Surely you don't expect to make your fortunes out here in the Oregon wilds—" put in another—"where the settlements are so far apart?"

"We plan to take up other work," said Amy, trying not to be annoyed. When something good offers."

"Sort of soldiers of fortune," Eliza commented. "Like in Sir Walter Scott."

"You'd better be settling to something right off. Winter is coming on."

"It won't be any fun to be a vagabond then."

That rather hurt, and Amy's pointed chin jutted out a little.

"What did you do after your ship was lost?"

"We stayed first at an Indian town. They were friendly to us."

"And you sang and danced for them?" Eliza asked, with a slight note of scorn.

"Why not?" said Amy. "They danced for us, too."

"You must have made an impression. A canoe filled with them arrived from down river less than an hour ago. Among them was a princess—a real one, if you accept Indian royalty. They call her Princess Sonalomie."

"Oh," said Amy. Lex had found the princess amusing.

Someone resumed the questioning. "Where are you going from here?"

"My brother hasn't said as yet."

"You are making the rounds of the settlements?" Eliza asked keenly.

"I suppose so."

Eliza's lips went shut in that peculiar manner again. It seemed that the meal would never end. But finally Amy got away with the guitar and started for the fir grove. Lex was no doubt already impatient.

As she came hurrying up she saw that her brother was occupied—and pleasantly. He and the Princess Sonalomie were sitting on a fallen fir, so absorbed in each other that not even the Indian girl's sharp ears had warned them that anybody was near. In fact, Lex was kissing Sonalomie with ardor.

IT SENT a pang through Amy. She stopped still. At that moment she felt absolutely alone in the wilderness, much more alone that she could have been in her own world. Lex was already restless under the burden of a sister. What heart would he have left for her now, with a sweetheart?

They both saw her at the same time. Sonalomie's moon-like face was impassive and a little defiant. Lex got up nervously and scowled at his sister.

"Shall I go?" Amy asked.

"So long as you're here, we may as well run through with a few chords. I'm never sure of you."

That night everybody gathered in the great hall. There weren't seats for them all. Nearest the end where the performance was to take place some sat on the floor. Others stood in the rear of the room. The Princess, as became her rank, had one of the seats in between.

She wasn't a bad looking girl, although she was very dark and shiny. She had a round pleasant face, with straight black hair braided on either side of it. She was still slender and as agile as a panther. Over her Indian dress tonight she wore a bright plaid shawl for which she had that day traded beaver skins at the fort.

As usual before a performance, Lex was nervous. They had hung up blankets in a corner to make a dressing-room, and in this cramped space he lashed about like a hyena.

"Don't hurry me in the Highland Fling," he ordered Amy. "Give me time. Give me time."

"You're getting out of practice."

"I'm no worse than you," he snapped. "The last time you did the Spanish Fandango—"

He broke off, for Charles Goodpasture stuck his head through between the blankets. "The governor and Mrs. McLoughlin have just come in."

That was the signal for the show to start. Amy gave a last dab at the paint on her cheeks.

Lex held aside the curtain and Amy came out sedately in her wide silk skirt. Lex minced after her in his colonial satins and three-cornered hat, with lace billowing at neck and wrists. The waist of Amy's dress was molded to her pretty little figure.

The neck was cut square to show her throat, and the sleeves stopped above the elbow. Both were edged with narrow lace ruffles. Her glinting black hair was done high, and Lex wore a white wig.

It was the best Amy had been able to manage, and it passed with this uncritical and amusement-hungry audience.

She spread her skirts with a rustle and seated herself. She played a strong and lively rhythm while Lex danced. That was the way they always opened. Then with a bow and a flourish, he took the guitar and played an accompaniment to her singing.

Jokes followed, Amy "feeding" Lex his lines so that the applause fell to him. They sang together. Dancing must always be solo, since one of them had to make the music. They kept things going for some two hours.

Amy forgot the princess, but she was aware every minute of Charles Goodpasture. For him she did her best. Even with the governor and his lady before her, it was

Charles she played to. And there was no reason for it, except that his eyes helped her. Her heart was troubled and had been for many a month. Charles seemed to lift her up.

She gave off charm. Her strange pale green eyes fascinated every one in the room. Even when Lex was dancing, one could not forget Amy. Least of all could Charles take his eyes from her. She was indeed something like a witch.

It was the best work Amy had ever done. She remembered, also, to hold the music back in the Highland Fling to accommodate Lex's step. When it came her turn to dance, she tucked a pink rose behind her ear, threw a bit of black lace over her head, and whipped out from her skirt a wide fan. She swirled it open and became a belle of Spain.

Lex's hat had come off and on during the evening. Now he swung it from his head with a wide sweep and sent it around the room. From hand to hand it went, and coins jingled into it. Amy was playing her appealing best in the meantime. When Lex returned with the hat held jauntily under his arm, they clasped hands, bowed low and withdrew.

Even Lex was pleased with Amy. "Not bad," he said, as they were putting their few "props" away.

The audience surged up to them.

Mrs. McLoughlin held Amy's hand and said. "You were charming, my dear, charming."

And the governor remarked: "What strange eyes you have, child."

"Why, John," said his wife, "they're beautiful."

"Very suitable for an actress," he amended.

"We're so unused to anything but dark eyes—"

Amy didn't hear any more, for Charles Goodpasture had slipped his hand under her arm. When he got a chance he whispered in her ear: "We have a little private supper for you and your brother laid in the library. Let's slip out."

LEX had brought his princess. Eliza Douglas was there, acting as hostess, for it was she who had arranged the supper at Charles's suggestion. With her were several other young people.

"Why, this is kind of you, Eliza," Amy said. "It's more than we deserve."

"There's nothing too good for you," Charles said. In a whisper he added: "We didn't expect royalty. It was Lex's idea."

"She was kind to us," Amy returned.

"These Indian girls are possessive," he told her, managing to seat himself beside her. "If they set their hearts on a man, he might as well give up. It looks as though Lex Thorne is a gone goose."

Again the thrust went through Amy's heart. The cold meats and relishes, the sweetmeats, scarcely tempted her.

When the party broke up, Charles took her out into the autumn moonlight. "What will you do when Lex marries?" he asked gently.

"He hasn't married yet."

"But he will. If you don't mind my saying so, he will think of himself first and you second, always. Or rather, you third, as soon as he has a wife."

"I was surprised that she followed us."

"You needn't be. Indian girls think it quite an honor to entrap a white man for a husband."

"I didn't dream Lex was so interested."

"He didn't offer to marry her probably. So when he walked out, she promptly followed him and took things into her own hands. She has a kingdom—of a sort—to offer, you know."

"An Indian kingdom."

"It sounds big anyhow," said Charles. "Some adventurers have done very well that way."

"Oh," said Amy in a choked voice. "That's what we are to you—adventurers!"

"Does it have a bad sound? I didn't mean it so. We're all adventurers or we wouldn't have left civilization two and three thousand miles behind us to try our fortunes here."

"Yes," she admitted, in a daze.

"It's better than being known as a spy," he ventured.

"Who could be a spy here?"

He hesitated. "You could. And Lex."

"But how?"

"You are Americans. Your country is known to have jealous eyes on the success of us British. You've tried to crowd us out in the fur trade. The United States wants information. Who could pick it up better than strolling players?"

"Oh!" gulped Amy.

"You're known not to be using your own names. You must have some outside support. You couldn't keep going long on what falls into that fancy hat of Thorne's."

Amy asked, "And you believe that of us?"

"It's no crime. Not even a disgrace. It's merely business. And the life of a spy can be made hard. It's the part of the Hudson's Bay Company to make it hard enough that the spy thinks better of it."

"But Dr. McLoughlin has been hospitable."

"You'll never find him anything else to any stranger. But you won't be the first spies he has turned back."

"What will he do?"

"He can prevent your visiting other settlements."

A wave of distress went over Amy, and she cried: "What is to become of me?"

He leaned close. "You could give it all up. Let your brother marry his princess. I'll take you."

As bald and direct as that! No lovemaking at all. Nothing of the approach a lady had a right to expect—especially a lady who read Nathaniel P. Willis. It gave her a shock, when she had liked him so much. She struggled with her tears, but she tried to answer him kindly.

"You'd always think I— That I did it for your protection."

"I'll be good to you," he said earnestly. "I can't bear to see you go away. I want you to stay."

"It looks as if I'd have to stay. Maybe Mrs. McLoughlin will give me something to do. How long will it be before there's a boat?"

"Many months probably. You'd go back to Boston? But you just came from there."

"You ask too many questions. If this is a land of adventurers, then each one has a right to his own past."

She made as if to leave him, but he caught her hand. It was amazing how big and strong his hand was, and how easy it would have been to leave her own there.

I don't care what your past is, nor who you are, nor why you came. If you go away, Amy, I'll follow you—as the princess did Lex." He drew her to him.

"I like you very much," she said. "But please let me go. It's all too muddled."

Suddenly Charles turned her about and kissed her. She felt like a doll in his arms. It was a swift, abrupt kiss. It didn't coax and try to be gentle. It took her for granted. Took it for granted that Amy Thorne, born a lady, no matter what she now might be called, would fall into his barbaric arms the minute he reached out for her.

Yet there was fire and magnetism in his lips. Did a man kiss you like that when he'd just offered a business arrangement? Might he not love her just a little? If they had had more time together Amy might have formed a better understanding of Charles Goodpasture.

WITH a warning cough Lex stepped out of the dark. "I came to escort my sister to her room," he said with an air of displeasure. "It's late, and you'll excuse her, I know." If the added words were meant to soften his sternness, it was only in the form and not in the feeling.

Amy resented Lex's carrying her off. He was scolding her as usual.

"You're going too fast, my girl."

"But I thought you approved of him."

"Later, maybe. Not now. I've got to be on the move before daylight."

She cried, "But, Lex, why?"

"If we don't get out now we'll not be able to for a long time. We'll be held here all winter. We'll have to work along with the servants. And they'll ship us back on the first boat out. They think we're United States spies."

Amy felt unreasonably irritated. "Did you hear Charles telling me that?" If so, he must have heard everything else."

"I did. And I heard it from Sonalomie. I also caught some of the men muttering about it. They shut up so quickly when I came along that I knew something was afoot."

"Where do you mean to go?"

"With Sonalomie. Back to her home."

"And what shall I do there? Marry an Indian and settle down in their savage life? You know I can't."

"It's just the berth for me. I never did hanker after work, you know. When Sonalomie's father dies, I'll become the chief of the tribe and have a thousand savages to work for me."

"But I shall perish!"

"If you show signs of really giving up the ghost I'll put you on a boat some day. If you like the prospect in Boston better. Come, now. Go in and get your things together. Sonalomie and I will be waiting down by her canoe."

"What if Eliza stops me? She'll be sure to ask questions."

He gave her arm a shake. "Where are your wits? Eliza won't stop you. Don't you know she's engaged to Charles Goodpasture?"

Amy was almost in tears as Charles left her at the Douglas house. Eliza and Charles engaged! What had he meant, then, in saying she could solve all her trouble by going to him? Was he deceiving Eliza? Or had he meant to deceive her? Did he think he could make a sport of Amy Thorne, because she was an actress, because she was out of place in the wilderness?

Eliza was already in bed and sleeping the sound sleep of rugged youth. Amy went on tiptoe. She took off the red silk and packed it away in the travel-marred portmanteau. She put in her other belongings and got into her dark gray woolen traveling dress.

Eliza mumbled and turned over. "You take such a long time about getting undressed." Through half-opened eyes she saw Amy tying on her hood, and raised up on her elbow.

"Why, you've been changing your clothes! And your satchel—where are you going?"

Amy said lamely, "Lex wants me."

"Are you sure?" Eliza sat up and stared wide-eyed at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think you're running off with Charles Goodpasture?"

"Oh, my, no!"

Eliza bounded out of bed. "Because you can't do that. I'll just go along and see what this is all about."

"But, Eliza, I can't wait for you to dress."

"Yes, you can. It won't take me but a minute."

Amy didn't know how to avoid her. She snatched up her bag. She didn't think Eliza would follow her until properly robed in all her long skirts, and under-blouses and over-blouses.

"I've got to run," Amy said. "Thank you for your kindness. And don't bother to come along. Your Charles is safe from me."

Eliza screamed, "Wait!"

But Amy was already hurrying through the front door. She was astounded when Eliza came pattering after her in her bare feet, with only a blanket pulled across her shoulders over her long night-gown, which seemed likely to trip her at every step. Nor could Amy get rid of her. Eliza followed stubbornly.

"You'll see it's Lex I'm meeting," Amy said to the girl. "If you don't say anything to Charles you'll be safe enough. Just be still and let me go—out of your lives." She choked over the last words.

Amy struggled along as fast as she could with her heavy load. Lex was at the landing waiting for her. Besides him, there were only Indians at the canoe. One could count them in the moonlight.

"You see?" said Amy. "Now will you go back."

Eliza stopped at a little distance. Amy could hear her teeth chattering with the night cold.

"All right," said Eliza. "Go, and good riddance. Nobody needs to know that I saw you go."

The Indians dipped their paddles into the stream, and the canoe moved away almost noiselessly.

Amy was upset and confused. Life had been strange and trying ever since she and Lex had set out on this mad trip. It was growing more so. Right now the hardest

The winning last line of the December PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

A single glance would tell you
She can pitch more woo than hay.
And what young cowboy wouldn't like
"I'm yours," for her to say.

was won by S/Sgt. John W. Berkheiser, California.

thing was leaving Charles Goodpasture. And yet why should it be? Why should she regret that she couldn't say good-bye? He wasn't honorable. He wasn't even romantic. Amy had dreamed of someone as courtly as a Willis hero and as fanciful as a stage lover.

She believed Eliza would keep her word. If they were likely to be stopped as spies, it was just as well that not even Charles should know she was leaving.

THE wedding ceremonies began as soon as they arrived at Sonalamie's home. The long-drawn-out celebration was endless to Amy. Her brother had lost all interest in her, and she was left to become one of the squaws. Very little importance was hers as the mere sister of the bridegroom.

She was very sad as she went about among the low wooden huts that the Indians built in this country. They were dark and dirty, although all the tribe looked strong and healthy. A peculiar Indian odor hung over everything. Amy hated it. She tried to make herself a clean spot in the hut she shared with the younger sisters of Sonalomie, and they laughed at her.

She could not understand the change in Lex, although she had lived through others in him. How long would it last?

The festivities went on for several days. There was feasting and drinking and dancing, even fighting. At last things quieted down and most of the natives were sleeping it off, when a canoe manned by French voyageurs appeared on the wide stretch of the Columbia which the village faced. It made its way to the landing, and in it was Charles Goodpasture.

There was instantly a hubbub among the Indians. Amy saw him stepping ashore, with the savages crowding around him. Her heart bounded as if released from under a heavy weight, and she ran down to meet him. No matter what he had said or done, there was no one in the world she could have been gladder to see.

He took both her hands and looked at her as if he could look forever. "Well, here you are, safe as sunshine, and right as rain," he said. "I thought you'd probably gone with the princess. It was plain enough she was after your brother."

"And got him," laughed Amy. "Such a time!—to make a prince of him!"

"And you?"

The joy faded out of her face. "I don't belong anywhere."

"I've come to have a talk with you. Let's walk a little—anywhere to get away from this curious mob." When some of the Indians would have tagged along he ordered them back.

Amy led him to a bank of stiff tall ferns nearly waist high that she had found growing along a small stream, in an open place among the trees. Among them was a wide flat rock.

"We can sit here," she said. There was a cool fresh wind that day, that had a taste of winter in it, but in this protected spot it was quiet and the sun warm. Under the warmth the ferns gave off a sweet earthly scent. Large brown birds with bright breasts flitted away from the water with a loud whir.

Charles took her hand. "I want you to speak freely to me. You'll just about have to. I'm your friend. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm sure you must be. In spite of everything." How could you doubt him when he was there beside you, with the very air vibrating about him.

"In spite of what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Have you heard that a boat came in at Fort Vancouver two days ago—the 'May Watson'?"

"No."

"The Indians must know of it. They never miss anything, going or coming, on the river."

"Why was I left in the dark?"

"Maybe they want to keep you. Or Thorne does."

"You wouldn't think he cared one way or the other."

"There's someone else who does care. Who doesn't want you to become a prisoner here."

Amy felt her face grown warm. She felt as light and happy as air. He must mean himself. But her hopes sank with his next words.

"Dr. McLoughlin," he supplied. "If you wish to go back, now is the opportunity. Before you have time to gather any more information for Washington."

Amy surged with contrary feelings. She withdrew her hand. "To go home! I'd love that—in a way. But what's this about Washington? There's nothing to that spy story at all. What can the governor fear?"

"It's been a friendly rivalry so far between the two nations."

"Still, Lex has given up trouping. It was only a makeshift."

"We guessed that."

"But not for the reason you think. He was merely seeking his place in life."

"If he wants to go native, maybe he has. But can you reconcile yourself to this?"

"No! Oh, no. I want to get away."

He picked up her hand again and laid it on his knee, where he held it under his own. "Is there any reason why you can't tell me the whole story?"

She trembled, tempted to confide in him. But if he didn't play fair between two girls, had she a right to trust Lex's safety to his hands?

"I suppose you know no white woman ventures here without a husband. Why did you?"

"For Lex's sake."

"And what prompted him to come?"

Amy was silent.

"Could you be enduced to tell Dr. John? It might mean a lot to you both."

"But the doctor's so tall. He's so stern. His head is so square and white. He frightens me." But in her mind's eye she recalled his steady eyes, the way he had smiled at the show. Anyone would know he was good.

"If you took me to him would he make me a prisoner?"

"I assure you he would not. You may go aboard the 'May Watson,' or come back here. He promised me. Or—you remember what I said to you."

He must be referring to his strange offer of protection. Amy pulled her hand away and rose nervously, "Take me to Dr. John," she said.

When she managed to get hold of Lex, all he would say was: "It won't hurt to have a talk with his nibs. As for me, he won't touch me. I'm a chief's son now. Since you're not content here, why don't you marry Goodpasture?"

The Indians let her go.

IN THE morning when she said goodbye to him there was a empty feeling in her heart. Her bags, with all she possessed, were stowed in the canoe, and Charles helped her in. The voyageurs struck up a song as they pulled against the current. It seemed to ease their labor, and certainly it cheered Amy. The blues and reds of their shirts and feathered caps made a bright spot of color. The air was crisp with autumn, but the sunshine was brilliant, and the blue sky seemed to sparkle.

"It's a beautiful country," Amy remarked.

"It will be more beautiful when we have more settlers. At first the Hudson's Bay Company tried to keep it a land of trappers, but the tide can't be held back much longer. The only question is—shall it be British or shall it be American?"

"I begin to see. Some day Fort Vancouver will be a city, I suppose."

"And there will be others. South, north and east, towns are bound to spring up."

Amy sighed. "A long time from now?"

"Even in our day you'll see it. Once a good trail is worn across the mountains, emigrants will come in hordes."

It was sound sensible talk. Under the circumstances she wouldn't have wanted him to make love to her. Not with Eliza laying claim to him. Not in this canoe, with so many curious black French-Canadian eyes watching her every move and look. And yet— She called herself a fool for missing something.

Eliza received her back, but didn't seem too well pleased. It was already evening, and Eliza sat on the edge of the big bed, looking on while Amy smoothed her hair. Charles stood in the door, waiting to take her to the governor.

"You look like a witch, with those strange eyes of yours," Eliza said. "And you come from the witch country."

"But, Eliza," Charles put in, "there haven't been any witches for at least thirty years."

"I've been reading about them. If there ever were any, there still are. Merely be-

ARE YOU BUYING WAR BONDS?

cause they quit drowning them doesn't prove—"

"Why, Eliza!"

"Well, look at her. Doesn't she bewitch a person?"

Amy said, more amused than anything else, "You have light eyes, yourself."

"Mine aren't an ungodly green. I haven't black hair along with my blue eyes. And I don't talk with them."

Charles said, scowling a little, "Now, Eliza, be a good girl. Amy won't harm you."

"She can't. I've got a little cross I wear. See?" She pulled at a gold chain under the high collar of her blue wool dress. "But you— She's got you bewitched all right. She'll lure you away and make an Indian of you, like her brother. Or something."

He patted Eliza's braids. "Amy is really a very lonely girl. I hope you're a little kind to her."

"Oh, she is," Amy hastened to say. "It's hard on her—maybe I shouldn't have come back. It won't be for long."

"Maybe I was a cat," Eliza said. "Go along, Charles. I'll send her out in a minute." She closed the door on him. Then she said to Amy: "You leave Charles alone and it will be all right."

"Are you really engaged to him?"

"My mother has counted on our marrying some day."

"What does he say?"

"He never says anything. But mother is going to get after him. I'm old enough now."

Amy dabbed cologne on her handkerchief. "Do you love him?" she asked, her back toward Eliza.

"Of course. He's been at the house a lot, and I always—"

Amy's hand was on the knob. "How old are you, El[illegible]

"Seventee[illegible]

"And I'm twenty," said Amy firmly, and joined Charles in the hall.

Just what had she meant by stating with such finality that she was twenty? Was it, that being older, she could love more truly? For she did love Charles Goodpasture. There was no use in trying to hide it from herself.

Charles took Amy to the governor's office door and left her alone with him. He was busy with some papers, but he told her to sit down. She thought he was giving her time to become more at ease. When he turned to her she didn't find him hard to talk to.

"Your position is a strange one, my child," he said. "It will be best if you confide in me. You may trust me. Goodpasture tells me that you left your home on your brother's account. Does that mean he was in trouble in Boston?"

She looked down and her fingers twined about each other.

"Don't be alarmed," said the doctor. "I venture to say that every man here has been in difficulties somewhere. We are given difficulties to live them down."

"He—he had to get out of Boston," Amy admitted. "He'd got into trouble. He'd lost his share of our inheritance. So he needed my share, and he had to bring me along. There was no one to leave me with."

"You were willing to come?"

"Oh, yes. It looked like romance—from that far away. You see, maybe I'm a little like my brother. He calls it adventure. Do I have to tell you more?"

"Not about that phase of it. We'll say that Lex Thorne—or Alexander Thompson—came to make a new start. No doubt he listened to the extravagant tales about the West that are going the rounds in Boston. But I don't understand your appearing as strolling players."

"We used to engage in it at home. I was more of a parlor entertainer, but Lex went about. He didn't like work and—"

"I see. Could it be that your brother undertook this journey in the employ of somebody else, to gather information?"

"I'm quite sure he didn't engage himself to anybody. If he had he wouldn't have needed my money. We wouldn't have had to be so careful about getting away."

The doctor's lips quirked. He pushed something aside on his desk. He looked at Amy from under his beetling white brows and asked: "Do you think he means to settle among the Indians?"

"It would seem so now."

"And you?"

Amy spread her hands in mute despair.

"It seems your brother has practically deserted you. Do you want to live with the Indians?"

"No."

"Do you want to return to Boston?"

"I suppose I must."

Dr. John rose. "A girl belongs at home," he said. "It would be well if you went. Or," he added, with a quiet smile, "if you married some good man here in the West."

He took her to the door and handed her over to Charles. "The young lady has decided to go home." Seeing Charles face fall, he added: "Of course, that will depend." His mouth was straight, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

Charles turned toward the library with Amy, saying nothing till he had her there with the door shut. He stood close beside her, looking earnestly into her eyes.

"There's nobody needing you in Boston. You said so. Here there is. I need you."

She shook her head, and her mouth tried to smile. "Eliza will console you." But her heart was throbbing painfully.

"No one could console me but you. Eliza is only a child."

She gave him a sidelong glance out of her strange green eyes. "Have you looked at her lately?"

"Not since you came, I haven't. How could I look at anybody but you? Maybe you have bewitched me."

A glow went over Amy. "That would be very bad for you."

"I like it. I didn't know how foolish love could make a man. Nor how happy. And how miserable."

"Still, you're supposed to belong to Eliza."

"Supposed? By whom? I've never said a word to her about it. She reads too many novels."

"Not a word—even to her mother?"

"I swear it. You're the only woman I ever wanted to marry. Take me and be a trader's wife. A trader may not be much, but if he works hard he gets to be a partner."

Tears struggled through Amy's voice. "Wouldn't that be—rather a marriage of convenience?"

"A marriage of love, too."

"I'm not very suitable for you."

"I love you for yourself. All this storm about you—what does it amount to?" He was awkward as he put his arms about her. "I'm from the West—I don't know your ways. I've been afraid of you ever since that night when your brother snatched you away from me. I must have transgressed in some way."

Amy stood twisting a button on his coat. Nothing seemed very clear to her. The world swam in a delicious haze.

"I couldn't live at the Fort," she said. "Not under Eliza's eyes, with all that reproach in them."

"You won't have to. I have property in Oregon City."

"Where's that?"

"It's no city yet. It's one of those coming towns I told you about. I'll build you a house there."

Her forehead leaned an instant against his rough coat. "Don't you know I don't want to hear about a house?"

He looked at her in stark surprise. Her queer cornered jaws and her little pointed chin were quivering.

"Oh, after a while, of course," she added. "But what I want to hear about now is—love. Don't the men out here ever tell a girl they love her?"

"Good heavens, haven't I told you—in many ways?"

"But I'd like to be told in words. And in—"

"All right. I love you. I'll say it every day. Now in what other way were you talking about?"

Amy's color flamed like the wild rose of Oregon. "In kisses," she said. "Oh, now you'll think me unmaidenly," she cried in distress, and tried to break away from him.

But Charles Goodpasture wouldn't let her go. "My soul! And all this time I didn't dare!" And when he kissed her now, the kiss was right

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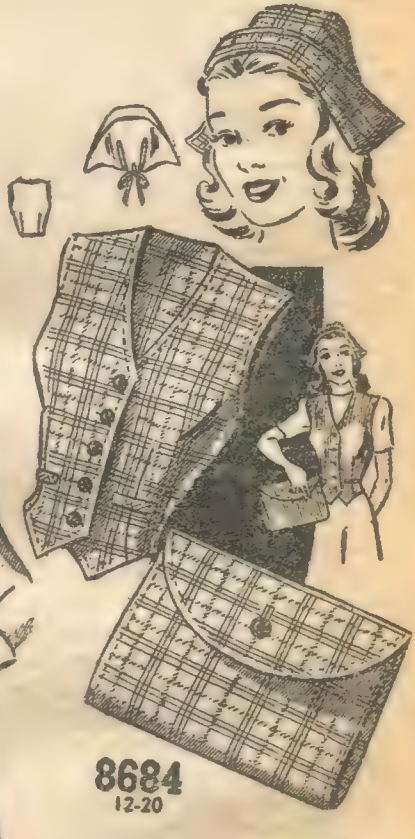

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WHEN TOMBOY LIPS SURRENDER

By William Fargo

Tomboy Nancy made one big mistake in taking advice from little, two-timing Lucile.

NANCY BENTON could think only of that doggone cowboy. He was in all of her dreams. He was in all of her thoughts. She could see his face just about everywhere she looked. Trouble was he never saw her—*anywhere.*

"Yeah—that's the trouble," she said, not realizing she spoke aloud.

"What's the trouble?" Lucile Morgan asked.

Nancy jumped as if someone had dropped a snake into her lap.

"Why—no trouble at all," she said. "I mean—that Idaho."

"Oh!" Lucile said. Lucile's voice went up in pitch. Lucile was just about Nancy's best friend. She had come over this evening to have supper with the Bentons and now was waiting on the wide ranch porch with Nancy while the Idaho cowboy saddled up three horses down at the corral. She could see the glow of his lantern that was hanging on a nail driven into one of the posts. She could see him moving around, throwing a saddle over a horse's back. Though it was only in her head she could see the ripple of long muscles across his wide shoulders as he lifted the heavy kak. She said very softly: "Maybe the trouble's in you."

"Maybe," Nancy shrugged, resolutely keeping her face away from the corral.

"Maybe the trouble is you're just too good at everything," Lucile suggested.

Nancy wanted to drop the subject. She was sorry that she had ever brought it up or that it had gotten this far. It was not natural for Nancy to talk over her troubles even with such a good friend as Lu-

So he liked his women to be women—and his liquor to be melted dynamite!

cile. But Lucile had gotten going and she was not one to give up readily. Her voice took on a note of serious eagerness, as if she had just discovered something.

"That's it," she said. "You probably terrify the man. You can do everything just as good as he can and some other things besides."

"I can't heft a hundred pound sack of oats in each hand," Nancy defended her femininity.

"But you can shoot and rope and ride better than most cowpunchers. You can handle a six-mule hitch—and—" Lucile hesitated. "I don't doubt that you can discuss life with the mules, too, better than most mule-skinners."

"Why—Lucile!" Nancy was shocked.

But Lucile laughed. "Sure—" she said —"he's scared to death of you. Why, I heard him saying to—who was it?—anyway, he was saying he liked his women to be women, his horses to be mean, and his drinkin' liquor to be melted dynamite. Sure—that's the trouble."

Nancy did not see that Lucile had her fingers crossed, nor did Nancy notice the quick blush that this untruth brought to Lucile's soft cheeks. Of course, Lucile salved her conscience, she had not really lied. The cowboy had said what she had repeated. He had said it to her that afternoon and he had adfded: "And that Nancy Benton has all three. Miss Lucile—but she's too damned good for me."

"Well," Nancy said. "Let him have them. There's more hombres in the world."

She knew that was not so. There was only one man in the world, Idaho, who would lick anybody who called him Horace which was his right name. He was the only man in the Universe, damn it, and he was standing below the porch now with the three horses.

"Give you a hand, Miss Lucile?" he offered.

"Why—thanks," Lucile said.

She went down the steps in a ladylike manner. The cowboy held the stirrup for her while she mounted to the saddle. When Nancy followed he merely passed her the reins and swung a leg over his own horse. Nancy squeezed back a couple of tears in her blue eyes. It was always like that. Nobody had ever gone out of their way to hold a stirrup for her.

THEY rode through the wonderful, dreamy moonlight to Lucile's place where the cowboy handed his reins to Nancy then got down to help Lucile from the saddle. Lucile put plenty of weight on him. Lucile had a lovely little figure. Lucile also knew that when she put her head down a bit and glanced up at a man through long, lustrous lashes it often took away that man's breath. She tried this on the cowboy. But nothing happened.

He treated her very courteously and escorted her to the front door. When she called "Good night" he took her horse down to the corral to unsaddle it. Then he came back to the house where Nancy was waiting holding the reins of his horse. Without a word he took the ribbons, vaulted into the saddle.

They returned to the Rafter B in absolute silence. They had ridden rather slowly coming over, out of deference to Lucile, but he led the way back at a clip dangerously fast for night riding and across the prairie rather than along any recognized trail.

This only served to lift Nancy's anger to hotter pitch. He would coddle Lucile, but he would run Nancy to death or ignore her, and when they reached the home ranch he even let her unsaddle her own horse.

Furious she turned to the house. He trailed her. He followed her as far as the steps to the porch, carrying his hat in his hand, trying to think of something to say. When they got that far she swung around to face him.

She was up a couple steps from the ground, bringing her face just a bit higher than his. His nose was just about on a level with the button of her open-throated shirt as he stood there tongue-tied. Moonlight painted his short curly hair with gold. The shadows on his face made him look solidly handsome. Nancy wanted to scream.

"Good night," she said, very controlled.

Why couldn't he break down for once—and—something.

"Uh—be seein' yuh," he said.

"I doubt it," she said. "I doubt if you'll ever *see* me." She ran up the steps to the house leaving the bewildered cowboy behind.

Lucile was not only Nancy's best friend, but Lucile knew lots about men, having

devoted a good deal of time to them while Nancy's father was bringing up his daughter to be a cowpuncher. Nancy's father had done very well at that, and Lucile had done even better in her own department. There was hardly a man in the neighboring seven counties who did not give Lucile a prominent place in his dream life.

So Nancy decided to put into effect the advice Lucile had hinted to her on the front porch. If this cowboy wanted a feminine girl, by heck she would make herself into one. She would make Lucile look like the rugged outdoors type, she would be so feminine, and she had no idea at all that that was exactly what Lucile wanted.

Next morning Nancy spent a long time fixing her natural auburn curls into neat ringlets. She put rouge on cheeks and lips that needed none. And, instead of her usual work outfit, she slipped into a cotton dress that made no secret of her slender waist and curved hips. She was just about to get into shoes and stockings when her father yelled at her from downstairs.

"You sick? What's keepin' you?"

"I'm fine—Daddy," she said.

"Daddy?" he said disgustedly. She had always called him *Bull* just as everyone else had. And she had always shown up in the morning, Sundays included, in levis, boots and shirt ready to go to work. But today when he saw her in that dress he almost exploded. "Daddy!" he shouted. Then his huge voice dropped to a whisper. "You been drinkin'?"

"Why—no—Daddy," she said. "I'm not a child any more—and—"

"I can see that,' he said. Then his voice came out full. It rattled the house. "I'll *Daddy* you!" he roared. "Get out of that —that thing. Get your pants on. Wash your face. And hop to it!"

Terrified, she retreated in a hurry.

ELL, she had lost round one, and as if she was to be punished for it her father assigned her to working with Idaho all day gentling horses. She just could not bear the thought of spending the entire day with this cowboy who never looked at her. But then she had an idea.

She put this into effect promptly by throwing her loop at a fine big black horse and missing him completely. She could have tossed that rope blindfolded over her shoulder and caught a crow out of the sky by his off leg—but her loop never even touched this horse.

Her father saw what she had done and growled into his walrus mustache. Idaho saw it, too, and his eyes opened wider than they had ever opened before. Idaho finally had to catch the horse.

She had won round two. But the battle was not over yet; she had not won Idaho. When she saddled up she forgot—purposely—to tie the latigo properly and consequently the saddle slipped when she tried to climb aboard. It slipped clear under the horse's legs.

The horse let go with a terrific squall, started hopping around. The saddle slapping against his legs drove him almost crazy. He kicked violently in fear of this horrible thing under his belly. He ran blindly into a fence—and it took both Bull Benton and the Idaho cowboy to catch and quiet him.

While Idaho cinched down the saddle correctly Bull came over to his daughter who was leaning in a ladylike manner against a corral post trying to look pale.

"You want a lickin'?" Bull asked.

He had not spanked her in fifteen years —which was as long back as she could remember—but she reckoned she had better carry on the rest of her campaign out of his sight.

"I'm sorry, Da—Bull," she said.

Her father snorted. "Da—Bull," he said, and went away. . . .

Nancy and Idaho were breaking these horses for roping so they headed for the creek bottom where there would be plenty of beeves to practice on. Nancy managed to do very badly at this occupation that was actually more natural to her than walking. She lost her rope and had to get down to retrieve it.

She burned her horse's neck with the lariat, the worst thing she could possibly have done. She had the horse so jittery he shied off every time she shook out a new loop for a fresh start. She had Idaho close to a nervous breakdown.

She had succeeded finally in making him look at her. But she was not at all sure that the look was the kind she wanted.

So she bided her time until it seemed about ripe for the winning of round three.

The cowboy was afoot teaching his horse to keep a steady pull on the rope. He was not at the moment looking her way, so he could not know that she was faking. She let out a sudden, violent scream, hauled six-shooter from holster and took to firing into the grass just ahead of her horse, pretending she had seen a rattler.

For a second the horse froze. Then he flew apart. He went up in the air, came down on bunched hoofs, and left for home. By that time she was not in the saddle. She came down with a mighty bump in the grass, sat there a moment, remembered it was all part of an act and rolled over. After a while she knew that Idaho was beside her.

Idaho asked: "Hey—you hurt?"

She waited a dramatic moment. She groaned, opened her eyes with a flutter. She wished he would put an arm around her and lift her from the ground, or something. But he only stared at her.

"Oh-h-," she sighed.

"Reckon you'll live," he said. "I'll try to catch your horse."

Nancy thought she had been furious last night. But now she knew what the word really meant. Because she had followed Lucile's advice she had lost forever this man. Heartbroken and disgusted she headed for home on foot, not waiting for him to come back. She walked a long way before the cowboy overtook her leading her sweat-marked horse.

"Here's your horse," he said. "But maybe you better walk off that jag. I knew you could ride better than most men and shoot like Annie Oakley. But I didn't know you were such a big drinker—especially so early in the morning."

She stopped right there, squaring off in front of him. "Get down," she said. "I'll shove that right down your throat."

He did not dismount. He merely smiled in a benevolent manner. "Get to walkin'," he said. "It'll sober you up quicker'n anything."

"I will not!" she shouted. Then she began to cry, and because she did not want to cry the tears flowed even more wildly. Then: "Lucile said that you said you liked your women to be women, your horses to be mean, and—" Her voice was hardly distinguishable. The cowboy leaned closer to hear. "She said," Nancy bawled, "you didn't like me because I can tool a six-mule hitch and cuss—" She ran out of breath.

A sudden light came to the cowboy's eyes. Nancy staggered slightly and he reached down to steady her. The light got brighter. With his big right hand he got hold of the waistband of her pants to lift her up onto the saddle before him. She let her head fall against his chest. He patted her back as if afraid he might break a rib. He gulped mightily.

"She say—uh—the rest of it?" His voice was a lump in his throat. "She say—you were everything I liked—but was too good for me?"

Nancy straightened abruptly there on the saddle before the man. So Lucile had been holding out on her. Just wait till she got her hands on Lucile. She opened her eyes, round and blue, and her face was very red. She could feel the heat from his face, too.

"But I'm not," she said. "I can't even rope—"

"You sure as hell can," he laughed, "and hog-tie, too, Lady. I ought to know."

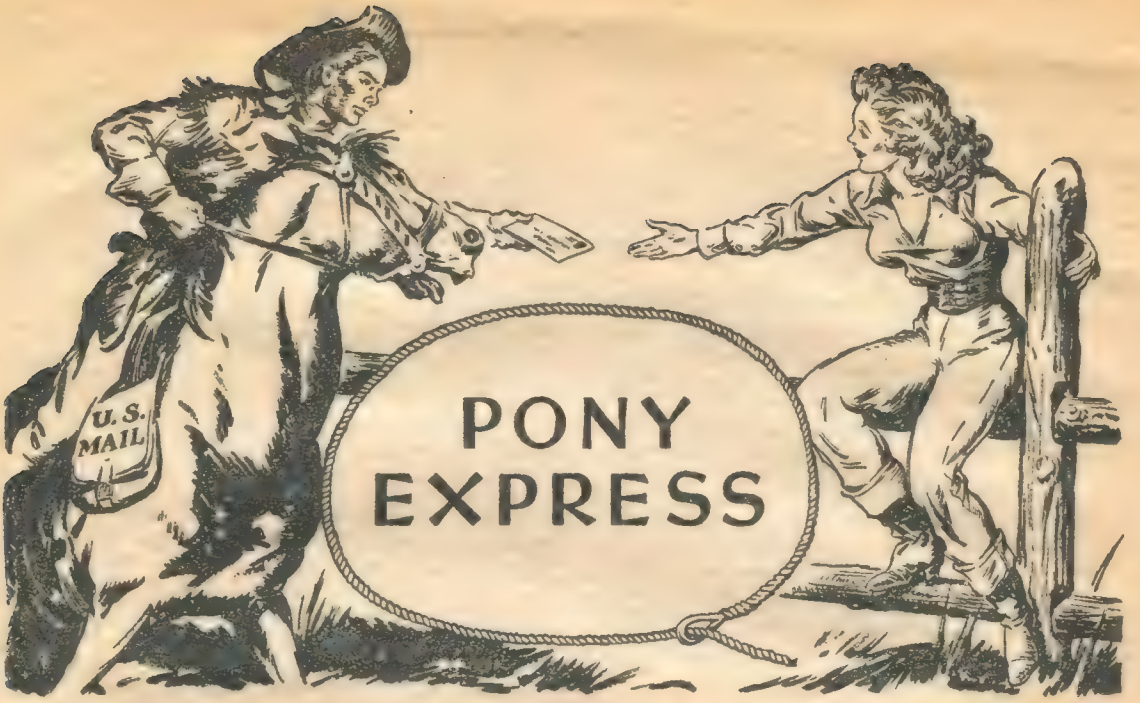
"Do you?" she asked.

He did not answer. He snuggled her close in his arms and when he kissed her he was not very expert. But his kiss had the strength of the hills in it, and the wind-swept breadth of the prairie, and her kiss was warm and full and sweet as the wild rose.

She reckoned she would ask Lucile to be the bride's maid. That would fix Lucile.

Keep your eye on the Infantry

. . . . the doughboy does it!



Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Irish Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

Could you help a lonely Irish cowgirl out of distress by introducing her to the pen pals of the Pony Express?

I have two brothers overseas. They are both in the Army.

I live on a cattle ranch in the Western part of Idaho. I love the ranch life very much. My chief hobbies are: horseback riding, movies, rodeos. I enjoy singing cowboy and hillbilly songs. I also like the popular songs. I got my RANGELAND ROMANCES yesterday. I always turn to the Pony Express page first of all. I hope I'm lucky enough to find room enough on the Pony Express.

I'm a lonesome blonde in my early teens. I have gray-green eyes and am 5 ft. 1½" tall. I'm expecting letters from cowboys and cowgirls, servicemen and people young and old all over the world. I have to ride 1½ miles each day to get my mail, so don't make me make that ride for nothing. Fill my mailbox, everyone!

MISS LORETTA PEARSON
Route 2
Parma, Idaho

. . . Or the Curl In Your Hair

Dear Editor:

Can you find space in the Pony Express for a regular reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES from the beautiful Ozarks? I think your magazine the best Western published.

Here's a brief description of myself, and I hope it will help bring me a shower of letters: I am 21 years old, have black wavy hair, big brown eyes, fair complexion, about 5 ft. 6 in. tall. I live in the country, enjoy horseback riding, swimming, dancing, music and am especially interested in song composition. My hobbies are letter writing and collecting postmarks from all over the world, so come on, all of you, do me a favor and give me your postmark, especially you guys in service.

May I hear from you? It makes no difference about the color of your eyes, or the curl in your hair, nor the rank or station. I promise to do my best. So, here's my name and address.

MISS WILMA LEE REYNOLDS
Jerusalem, Arkansas

Hello Girl

Dear Editor:

I would like to put in my bid for letters from the armed forces, any branch of the service, either sex. I am a lonesome telephone operator who loves to write and receive letters, and haven't a soul in the Army to write to. I hear about men and women in the Army who haven't anyone to write to them and here I am willing to write to some lonely person, and no way to reach that person except through your magazine. I am sure RANGELAND ROMANCES reaches a great many of these men and women, because it contains such interesting, clean, wholesome reading.

I am a young widow with a ten year old son to support. I am one of those small women. Five feet one inch tall, and only weigh 95 lbs. I have blue eyes and reddish brown hair. My main hobby is writing and reading so I am sure I could entertain anyone who would be interested in writing to me. Everyone is welcome, but I especially want to hear from men and women who are not getting letters when the mail call comes around. As I am unable to do what I would like

to do to help win this war, I thought maybe I could help in this small way.

MRS. ILA MAE O'DELL
c/o Telephone Office
Dill City, Okla.

Cowboy-Song Fan

Dear Editor:

I would like so very much to get a few pen pals from the Western states, also, Canada, Mexico and just anywhere else. Am 31, married and have three small children. Like to collect cowboy songs and pictures. Montana Slim is my favorite cowboy singer and the Sons of the Pioneers next. I'd be glad to exchange songs with anyone.

I love horses and mountains and hope, when this war is over, to live on a ranch. At present, we have a job to do that is more important, in the Navy Yard, helping to clean up the rat-infested South Pacific Islands.

Would like to hear from most anyone west of the Mississippi and in Alberta, Canada, or, well, just most anywhere. I like RANGELAND ROMANCES very much and never miss a copy.

Mrs. VIRGINIA MONK
453 Olympic, Chabot Terrace
Vallejo, California

Last Attempt. . . .

Dear Editor:

After several attempts at answering letters that appear in RANGELAND ROMANCES Pony Express, I find it would be easier to find a needle in a haystack than to receive any replies to my letters. Perhaps it is because the writers have received so many letters that they just didn't have time for mine. So, I'm going to make one last attempt to lasso a pen pal by making a direct appeal through the Pony Express and asking someone who is at times lonesome and would find enjoyment in the exchange of letters and ideas, likes and dislikes. I'm willing to discuss anything —Religion, Photography, Love, Politics, Radio Technics, even the weather is interesting, being a topic of conversation wherever people chance to meet.

So get out the old typewriter, sharpen the pencil or buy a new bottle of ink and write me at least one letter. I'll write the old, young, fat, lean or tall; those in between, I'll write 'em all.

A word in appreciation of RANGELAND ROMANCES. I think it is the cleanest magazine on the market and the stories are very enjoyable.

G. M. WILSON
10530 Tuxedo
Dearborn, Mich.

English Girl

Dear Editor:

I have just received a copy of RANGELAND ROMANCES from a friend. Of course, we don't see it over here very often, but when we do, it's really something!

I was very interested in the Pony Express, and was wondering if you had room on your pages for an English girl. I am 22 years old, and would like to hear from readers of either sex, anywhere. I enjoy dancing, reading, films, collecting snaps, postcards and souvenirs.

Will close now, hoping maybe to have my insertion printed, but I guess I won't have the privilege of seeing it myself. Here's wishing the magazine every success.

MISS MURIEL HOBBS
16 Raglan Street
Newport, Monmouthshire
England, G. B.

Farmerette-War Worker

Dear Editor:

I'm a combination of farmerette and war worker, so please print this urgent plea for pen pals in the Pony Express. This is my first attempt and here's hoping it won't turn out to be a great disappointment.

I'm a lonesome gal of 16 with curly brown hair and brown eyes; stand 5 ft. 2 in., weigh 110 lbs. Have numerous favorite sports and hobbies. I'm sure I have lots of experiences to write about, if you boys and girls will only give me a try. You'd all be keeping up the morale of a war-worker miss and making her very happy.

So come one, come all! Makes no difference where you hail from or whatever age you may be. Uncle Sam's boys are welcome. I promise to answer all pen-pal letters, even if I receive a thousand.

Closing with best wishes for my favorite magazine.

MISS DOROTHY SIMMONS
90 McCabe Street
South Dartmouth, Mass.
R.F.D. #4

Stormy Rea

Dear Editor:

I'm blonde, gray-eyed, 5 ft. 5 in. tall; weigh 120 lbs.; not extremely pretty, but have a nice figure. I'm engaged to an Army Sgt., who is now overseas, and I am very lonesome. I'm seventeen, and a sophomore (because of an illness, I have been unable to attend for 5 years).

I live in the largest lead and zinc mining district in the world, have numerous hobbies, keen sense of humor and am interested in everything, so am confident I can write pleasant letters.

STORMY REA
c/o J. O. Rea
Baxter Springs, Kansas
Route 1

Mrs. G. I. Joe

Dear Editor:

I am a new reader and would like so much to join your Pony Express. I am a girl in her early twenties; weigh 110 lbs.; 5 ft. 3 in. tall; brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are collecting picture post cards and phonograph records, and also books on other countries. I would like to hear from G.I. Joes or WAC's, WAVES or Lady Marines. I will try to answer all letters from anybody who cares to write.

I forgot to add that I'm married to a G.I. Joe myself, and also have a 17 mo. old baby.

MRS. ANNA HRANCHOCK
504 W. Norwegian
Pottsville, Penna.

"True-Blue" Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

How about finding room for one more passenger on the Pony Express who wants to visit distant places both in the United States and outside it—via the U. S. Mail?

I am a stranger in a strange city, and lonesome. Am 23, have brown hair, blue-gray eyes, 5 ft. 3 in., weigh over 150, medium height and am the mother of three sons under school age. My husband is a patient in the State Mental Hospital, and getting slowly worse, so I really get lonesome and blue at times.

I belong to the group that likes to cook, sew, and care for their own home. I do fancy work and for sideline hobbies collect poems, songs and scenic postcars.

Please, you gals and guys, write all about everything and help chase the loneliness. Will do my best about answering. Pictures will be enjoyed but I can't promise one in return.

So. Mr. Editor, here's hoping you find me a corner even if you have to cut out half of this letter. I am looking for steady and "true-blue" pen pals, not one-letter pals.

EDITH M. SADLER
39 Ambrose Street
Rochester 6, N. Y.

15 to 115

Dear Editor:

I don't know how many times I have written to you and I don't care, just as long as I get my name in this time. I like your magazine and wish you could have ten or more pages of the Pony Express.

I am a girl of fifteen. I have hazel eyes and light brown hair. My hobbies are writing letters and collecting picture postcards. When folks write, please send me a few cards, and I will do the same, if you want me to. The kind of people I want to write is anyone from fifteen to one hundred and fifteen. Boys, especially, in service or out, overseas or still in this country—kids in any country in the world. In other words, anyone is welcome to write to me. I will try and answer all the mail. Oh, yes—anyone that sends me a picture will get one of me. Only I warn you, I am not very pretty. Come on and fill my mail box full—will ya?

MISS DOROTHY JACKSON
117 2nd Street, NW
New Philadelphia, Ohio

"So Dumb, But Beautiful"

Dear Editor:

I'm seventeen years old. This is my second plea to you, but always—no soap! I love to write letters. I have long curly brown hair and dark brown eyes. I haven't any hobbies to tell you about, but I can really shoot the bull. I would love to hear from boys going in the service, or who are already serving our grand country. I work in a bakery, so it is very easy to pack nice boxes for you lonely boys overseas and the ones here in the States. I will exchange photos.

They say the song, "So Dumb, but Beautiful" just fits me. I'm really dumb, but can write and read. Oh yes, and smile. Help—Help—Help I want you all to write. I will answer every letter.

MISS JUANITA MARLER
911 Walnut
Neodesha, Kansas

A Pretty Girl . . .

Dear Editor:

There is a pretty girl in our neighborhood. She has often spoken of pen pals. She wants to join them awfully bad. She is eighteen years old, 5 ft. 5 in. and has beautiful golden-brown hair; her hazel eyes are gorgeous. She is confined to bed and if you people between the ages of 18 and 26 will write her, she will answer with snaps and I'll write her letters.

MARY MORRILL
Route 7—Box 1604
Portland 16, Ore.

"Lay That Pistol Down!"

Dear Editor:

Is it possible for a Kansas gal to get aboard the Pony Express on her first jump? I'm 18 years old; green eyes and brown hair; 5 ft. 1 in. tall and weigh 123 lbs.

I like letter-writing, horseback riding, swimming, traveling, hiking, ice and roller skating, and playing golf. I collect photographs, and souvenirs of places I've been. I have traveled in China, Cuba, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia. I am a Navy pilot's wife and a navy daughter.

I belong to a "gun club" and can shoot 95/100 in rifle and 90/100 in pistol shooting. I'd love to hear from girls and boys all over the world, and promise to answer any and all letters.

HELEN "Jerry" BAKER
926 W. 81st St.
Los Angeles 44, Calif.

Here's Lucky!

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to crash the Pony Express, but I sure hope I make it. Please don't ignore my plea for pen pals, fellas.

I am a young Army wife of seventeen, with a two months old baby boy. My husband is overseas and I'm living with my parents here in Michigan. But I don't have many friends here, so hope to have a lot of pen pals. I promise to answer all letters. I've been living in Montana for the past few years, so if any of you are interested in Montana, I reckon I could tell you quite a bit about the state.

I am 5 ft. 5 in. tall, have blonde hair and green eyes, and my nickname is "Lucky." So come on, pals, make me really "Lucky" and give me plenty of pen pals. People from Texas—no age limit—are preferred, as I'm interested in Texas, but anybody is welcome. Come on, don't let me down! I'll close now, hoping to hear from hundreds of pen pals real soon.

MRS. ROY HAGEN
739 Eureka St.
Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Ladies Only

Dear Editor:

Wanted! Letters from ladies only, by a lady of twenty-nine living in sunny California at the present time. I am interested in practically everything, and, as a hobby, collect novelty and pretty dishes, plates, salt and pepper shakers, sugar and creamer sets, pitchers, pictures, aprons, kitchen towels, pot holders, necklaces, earrings, phonograph records and flower plants and seeds. If you need help with your hobby call on me.

I hope my mailbox will be loaded with mail from you ladies, especially you WAC's, WAVE's, SPAR's and lady Marines. I like long, interesting letters—do you? Send me your snaps and I'll send mine in return.

MRS. W. C. BIRCHFIELD
1326 Belle Street
San Bernardino, California

Photo Gal

Dear Editor:

Here I am with a great big request for pen pals. I love to receive letters and will do my best to answer any and all letters. Would also like to exchange snapshots. I adore the out-of-doors and am very interested in old Mother Nature. The woods, the birds, the woodchucks, the bees, the flowers—and, of all things, termites! My favorite hobby is photography. I work in a photo-finishing company, so I have every opportunity to further my collection. Right now I am enlarging my favorite snaps into five by seven photos. Lots of fun.

I am one of the Adams girls in old Kansas City, Missouri, the heart of America. I am an old woman of twenty-three years, with a sense of humor. Come on everyone, and let's kid each other until we think we're happy even if we aren't. Lonesome, letterless soldiers are especially welcome. I hope I have to put up a new letterbox.

EMMA ADAMS
26 East 31st Terrace
Kansas City, Mo.

Here's Baby!

Dear Editor:

Would you please print my request for pen pals? I read every RANGELAND ROMANCES I can get and find them all very interesting. This is my first plea for pen pals and hope I'm not disappointed.

I am 15 years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weigh 148 lbs. (not fat by any means) have dark blue eyes and light, golden-blonde hair. My nickname is "Baby." I can't understand what I ever did to deserve it.

I live in a farming region, out where we have those *wonderful* sandstorms. Believe me, I don't like sandstorms either. I don't care much about farm life—but I love ranch life. I love most all sports, with the exception of boxing—and I personally think that's silly. If any of you inquisitive people want to know why, just write and ask me and I'll tell you without hesitation. I love most any kind of music, especially cowboy style.

My hobbies are collecting handkerchiefs and western books such as Zane Grey writes. My greatest ambition is to some day be a bus driver (funny ambition for a girl, isn't it?) Well, after all, we live in a queer world, don't we?

I've tried to introduce myself, so why don't you boys and girls sling some ink down old Texas way, and introduce yourselves too? I'll answer all letters and exchange snapshots, so hurry. There's always room for one more.

NEVA RUTH BELCHER
Route 1, Box 183
Slaton, Texas

"Huge" Success

Dear Editor:

Have been a reader of your magazine for many years and enjoy it very much, especially the Pony Express department. My hobby is pen pals. If this letter gets printed, I would enjoy hearing from foreign countries and Islands.

I would also like to hear from book lovers and

(Please continue on page 91)

My Favorite Fiancé

by

Phyllis Gordon Demarest

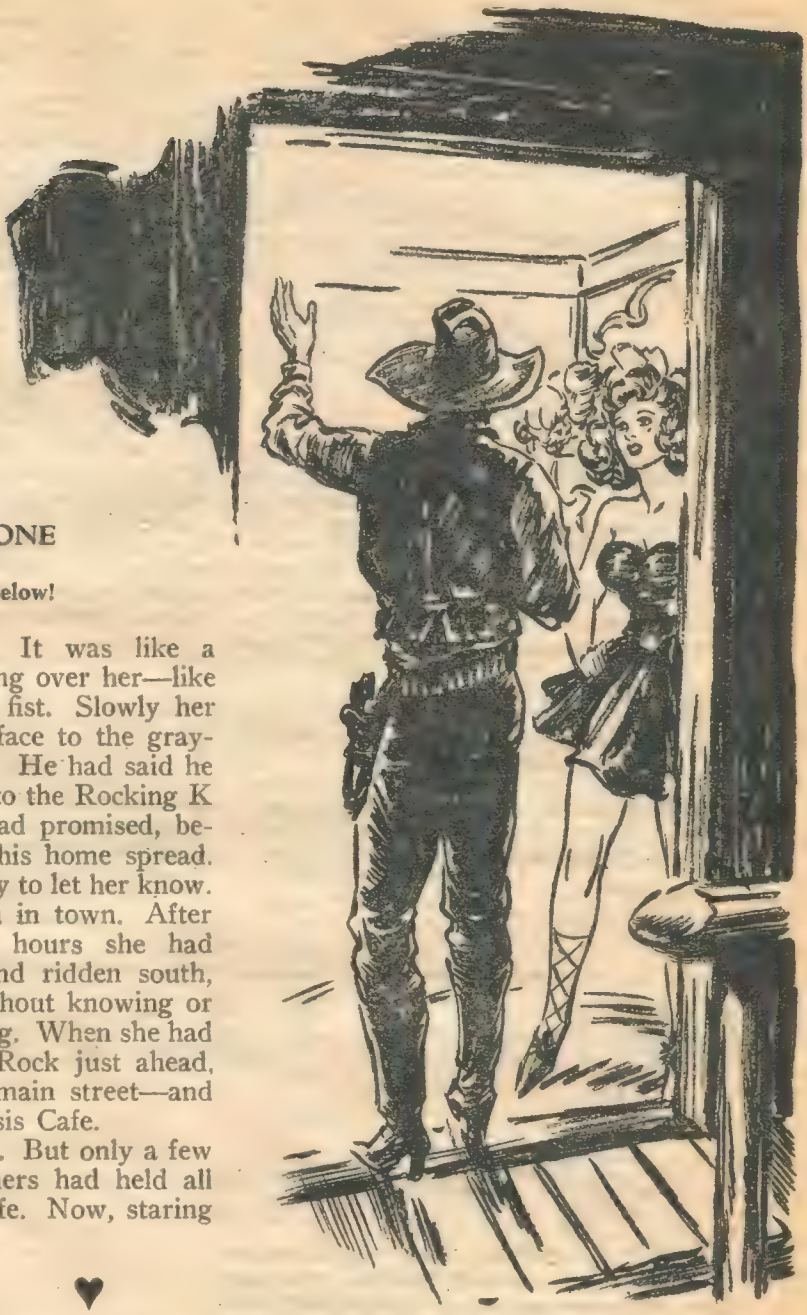
WHEN Celene took her fiancé home to meet her family, she was worried. Would he like them? They were zany and unconventional and, with them, anything could happen. What she didn't know was that her ex-fiancé had moved in with them and was waiting to welcome her and her new love. Romance and heartbreak were the result of this mad mix-up, because Celene's old love still wanted to marry her!

Love Book also brings you a variety of features ranging from dress and needlework patterns to a thrilling astrological forecast. Don't miss the March issue! It's on sale now.

15c Love BOOK MAGAZINE

♥ ♥ ♥ JEANIE'S

By Marian O'Hearn



CHAPTER ONE

That Valley—Below!

JEANIE knew then. It was like a mountain top tumbling over her—like the blow of a great fist. Slowly her eyes lowered from Cal's face to the gray-green sweep of the range. He had said he had been unable to come to the Rocking K the night before, as he had promised, because of a brush fire on his home spread. And there had been no way to let her know.

But—she had seen him in town. After waiting for almost two hours she had finally saddled a pony and ridden south, away from the ranch, without knowing or caring where she was going. When she had found the town of Gray Rock just ahead, she had turned into the main street—and seen Cal entering the Oasis Cafe.

So, he was lying to her. But only a few nights ago, his lips on hers had held all the truth and reality in life. Now, staring

♥ ♥ ♥

Jeanie's kiss-dizzy head couldn't decide between a handsome cowboy who had other girls in his life—and a stern gunhawk who wanted only one girl in his life.

KISS BONANZA

Jeanie now knew that Cal had lied to her. . . .

Sparkling Novelette

of

Pioneer Romance

at the range, she was remembering many small, puzzling things. . . . Things he had said: explanations which had been too vague.

During the seconds that she looked past him at the moonlit earth, her heart seemed to drain of everything it had held. As if

all the joy were running out and leaving it empty within her. Not dead. That would have been easier.

"I see." Her words were thin, almost light. "Of course, then, you couldn't get here."

No. You went into a place that's the scandal of the whole range. What was there, who was there? Why was it so much more important than our love?

Cal's hands closed over hers. "I brought the buckboard. This is just the kind of a night for a drive."

It might have been, for she had never seen such a moon or known a night so soft. The light was making Cal's fair hair into silver and picking up the glints of gold in his eyes. Her wrists were suddenly weak, as if her pulses had stopped and she swayed helplessly toward him. He was Cal and he was hers in a way no one else could ever be. They belonged together, as if she were an actual part of him.

He was bending over her, his lips curved. If, now, he would only say: "Forgive me, darling. I lied—I had to go into town. I went to the Oasis."

Then it wouldn't matter so very much. But this way, ready to take her kisses with lies on his lips—with lies which would always be there.

The helpless weakness passed and she straightened, pulling her hands free. "No—I can't. I'm so tired I want to go to bed early."

His eyes changed, were almost startled, for a second. "Jeanie, what's the matter? You act strange—as if you didn't believe me about last night!"

The gigantic fist smashed against her again and she wanted to close her eyes to shut out the sight of Cal.

"There's nothing the matter," her voice was wooden and flat. "It's just that I'm tired."

All the warmth went out of his face. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice as thin as her own. "If that's the way you want it."

He turned sharply to the buckboard, picked up the reins and flicked the whip. The weakness returned to her wrists and spread a bleak sense of loss through her body.

The buckboard rolled toward the gates, gathering speed as it reached the trail, and she listened until the sound of the wheels faded into the soft, steady breathing of the night. He was gone. Cal had left.

Her breath was a stabbing knife. If he didn't return part of her life would be done. The most important part, because Cal had become that so swiftly, so inevitably. Early last Spring, as she entered the hall where the County Association dance was being held, someone had immediately swept her into his arms, saying: "This is mine—before anyone else has a chance to claim it."

His eyes had been bright with little points of golden fire. And as abruptly as that, her blood had stirred into excitement. She had seen him almost daily since, for he worked on the Triple T, only a few miles from the Rocking K.

"Now I know why I came to this country," he told her, at their second meeting, "to find you."

"Then you must have just arrived—not to have known about me!"

"Yeah. A week before I met you."

The months since then had been short, bright moments, and yet had held a crowded lifetime. Maybe that was all the life she would ever have.

HER feet were slow on the steps, and she felt heavy and afraid. Once the door of the house closed behind her, something would be finished and done; it would mean goodbye to Cal. She halted, almost in panic and her eyes widened as she looked up at the door.

Then she turned back down the steps and around the corner of the house, toward range lane. But she stopped again, at once, for a man had moved out of the shadows and was blocking her way.

Her glance shot up to his face, but the shadow of his hat brim concealed everything except a thrusting jaw.

"You'll have to go in the front door, ma'am," he said, and his words slow and spaced, just missed being drawled.

Jeanie's gray eyes opened to wideness and her lips broke apart. "I'll have to—this is my home! Who are you and why—"

"Don't take it so seriously, ma'am. It's just for a little while."

Real fear touched her. A cold, chilling rush of it. What was happening—was the Rocking K being held up? There had been stories lately of a gang of outlaws striking

not only at town banks, but at isolated ranches. She looked toward the rear of the house, but there was nothing in sight. No group of swift ponies waiting to carry the criminals away.

The man chuckled. It was an amused, warm sound and made her realize that there had also been warmth in his voice. "No, ma'am," he said, "you're safe—and so's the rest of the ranch. You can go in the front door. I'll tell you this much—although I probably shouldn't—someone, who doesn't want to be seen, is calling on your father."

She stared through the mist of moonlight, trying to see his face, noticing the line of his wide, flat shoulders and the carriage of his head.

She whirled back to the steps and up to the door, with bright, sharp streaks of color in her cheeks. She would find out about this in just one minute.

Without slowing her pace, she fled down the hall toward her father's office—and was confronted by a middle-aged man who told her:

"Sorry, Miss, but you can't go in there."

"Yes, I can. I'm going to see my father." Her gray eyes were dark as bits of sky shipped by storm and her mouth was thinned until all trace of its young softness was disappearing.

"Not now, ma'am."

Jeanie's dark head lifted so quickly that it caught white light in its black sheen. Her small nose looked almost imperious and her chin was set as she met the man's unyielding glance with growing tumult in her own.

"Why not? And who are you?"

He smiled then. Jeanie was very lovely in the softness of the lamp-light. Her lips brilliant with anger, her eyes smokily dark.

"Well, maybe you'd better ask your Dad. You can call to him through the door. It's locked to keep everyone out."

He knocked and Tom Marlowe's voice snapped:

"Yes, what is it?"

Jeanie cried: "This man won't let me in!"

"I'm busy." The rancher's voice took on an edge. "You can see me later."

"But—"

"Jeanie," his words became a roar, "go away!"

She stood quite still for a moment, her gray glance boring into the blank surface of the door, but finally she turned back down the hall. Passing the living room, she hesitated, but went on to the porch where she stopped and stared out at the moonlit yard. A faint sound from the side of the house brought back the memory of the tall man who had barred her way. She went quickly down the steps.

"Maybe," she said, turning the corner of the house, "*you'll* explain this to me."

"Sorry, ma'am, it's one of those things. I can't tell you any more." The warmth in his voice seemed part of the night. And she noticed again the outline of his straight shoulders, the slimness of his waist.

"It's silly," she said. "As if this was a —"

"Holdup? Taking quite a while for that, isn't it? Usually outlaws don't go in for long conversations."

"I—don't know." She glanced across the yard at the lighted bunkshed. "I could get the foreman."

"You could," he agreed, and waited.

"Some of the boys are on the spread, too."

"Yeah. His voice held an edge of laughter. "They can rescue your father and you, too."

"I don't need any rescuing, apparently."

"Maybe," the low, warm voice dropped even lower, "you're the only one in danger, ma'am."

"I?"

"Well, it's that kind of a night. And out of the moonlight drifts the prettiest girl anyone ever laid eyes on."

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

Jeanie laughed softly. She had not intended to laugh, but the tall man with his face hidden by the shadow of his hat seemed suddenly very close—as close as Cal had been.

Her breath caught again, too quickly, and then she remembered she had encountered this stranger immediately after Cal had left. She lifted her head and warmth poured from her throat into her face. "You've been here for some time," she said. "That is—"

"Yeah," he spoke softly. "I was here when you told the fair-haired boy you wouldn't go driving with him."

"Oh."

"If I were polite, I'd say I hadn't heard anything. But I'm not polite, so I'll have to admit I heard it all. And you're wrong, lady."

The warmth in her throat turned to flame and as it burned a path up her cheeks, anger knotted inside of her. "Maybe I don't understand what you mean."

"Sure you do." The stranger moved a little; lightly, easily. "He was lying to you. It was pretty plain. And you immediately let your heart break right in front of him. I could hear it bust. But that just means you'll go on busting it all your life."

JEANIE retreated a little toward the side of the porch. "I'm glad you know so much about me," she said thinly. "But you're not very clear. Why shouldn't my heart break if—it had to."

"Didn't have to," he murmured. "You ought to be more practical, even about love. Men are going to lie to the girls they love and that's that."

"Why?"

He did not speak at once and when his words finally came, they once more held a chuckle. "Maybe because they figure on beating the game. They can have a lovely girl like you—the kind a man really wants—and put her up on a nice, high mountain peak out of the reach of other men. But sometimes they feel like going down into the valley to kind of look around and maybe get a little dusty. That mountain peak's sort of high and clear. They know they shouldn't, but they do any how, and when they come back—they lie."

"Very interesting." Her tones sounded as if they came from an actual mountain top, a snow-capped one. And she felt something like hatred for this man whose face she had not seen, because he had placed her love—Cal's love—with all the rest. He had pushed her down into the dust he was talking about. "And, from what you said, the lies shouldn't hurt?"

"Sure, they'll hurt, but smart girls don't show it. They know it's a question of whose lies they'll listen to."

Jeanie was silent. She grew very still, standing there before him, with her gray eyes very wide and her soft mouth unsteady. *Whose lies they'll listen to.*

It tore something away from her; it took the softness out of the moonlight and the tenderness from the night. If it was like that, then she didn't want it.

"I—I'm sorry I talked to you," she said and her voice broke. "Maybe that's the way life is for *you*, and you want to make it the same for everyone else—" her words caught in her throat, and she could not go on.

She turned, almost gropingly, toward the house, wanting to get away before he could see the tears.

"Hold on, ma'am." His hand closed on her arm. "Part of that was just intended to be funny. I didn't realize how it'd hit you, and I'd like to take it back."

She straightened and looked at him through shimmering tears. "*Can* you take it back? You can't, if you believe what you said."

His hand was still on her arm. "I didn't mean all of it. I was talking about most people, but once in a while a man likes mountain peaks—likes 'em so much he doesn't want anything else."

"Once in a while," she repeated, her voice bleak.

His hand tightened and drew her toward him. "Maybe this had to happen," he said softly. "It seemed like that to me—the first second."

Jeanie tried to free herself. "It also seems that you've made a mistake. Good night."

But his grip held and he pulled her back to him. "I don't think so," he murmured and, as his arms went around her, he bent to find her lips. And abruptly, strangely, she became still, making no further attempt

to escape. His mouth was young, as she had known it would be—clean, and holding the taste of the soft, betraying night.

He released her slowly, his eyes looking down into hers, and now she could see his face. Straight features, with the flesh drawn firmly over strong, well-shaped bones.

"I was right," he murmured. "A mountain top would be the best place. For me, ma'am. Maybe you'll remember that—and me."

"No," she said swiftly, "I won't. I don't even know your name and I haven't seen your face."

He jerked off the broad-brimmed Stetson and the light poured over his lean features and thrusting jaw. His hair was dark and straight above a wide forehead and his eyes, she decided, were brown, or probably hazel. Eyes with lighted depths.

"My name's Wayne, ma'am—Steve Wayne."

They looked at each other silently for a second which seemed to pull them together, across the little space between them.

Becoming aware of the tugging at her senses, Jeanie whirled toward the front of the house and this time actually did run for the steps. But halfway up she halted again, for a carriage was rattling around the house, toward the drive.

Almost at once two horsemen shot forward. Both of them were armed, and the one in the lead was Steve Wayne whom she had left only a moment ago, although she had seen no waiting pony. The buckboard appeared now. A big one, drawn by two horses and on the back seat was a middle-aged man flanked by more armed guards.

The carriage turned toward the gates and the horsemen shot ahead. Jeanie remembered a voice murmurin: "A mountain top would be the best place."

CHAPTER TWO

A Double Deal

SHE met her father in the hall and at the sight of his taut, set face, the chill fear fled through her once more. "What's happened, Dad? Who was that man—the one in the carriage?"

Marlowe hesitated. "I don't suppose you'll rest until you find out, so I'll tell you, but only on your promise not to speak of it to anyone—not even to your mother when she comes home. That reminds me, did you have a letter from her today? I thought she'd be here by this time."

"No," Jeanie smiled, touched by the new anxiety in his face. "But we'll hear tomorrow. And we ought to be glad she's not rushing back. This is the first vacation she's had in years."

Her father nodded. "Yeah, just as well she isn't home now. The man in the buckboard was the Governor of the state. That's all I can tell you and even that can't be talked about."

"The Governor! But what—I didn't know you even know him."

"I've known him a long time. We ramrodded together as boys. But it wasn't a social visit and that's why he didn't want to be seen."

"If it was business—"

"I'll tell you no more, because I can't. Isn't it about bedtime?"

"Who were the men with him? The guards?"

"Humph? I don't know. Just good gunnies, I suppose."

"Oh!" She turned to the stairs and went up to her room. *Just good gunnies.* And Steve Wayne was one of them.

At once she grinned at herself, realizing that it did not matter what Steve Wayne might be. But the grin died as she realized something else. Tonight she had lost Cal Vincent, whom she would always love. Even if he returned, she had still lost him. Or, at least, lost the unbelievable thing they had found between them.

With her shoulders drooping, she walked to the window and looked out over the yard. A fiercely tender night, and somewhere Cal was alone, too. His image formed against the moonlight. Formed so vividly that she could even see the tiny points of golden light in his eyes, and her pulses stirred against the flesh. She would forget what had happened that evening. She would wipe it out of her mind and cling to her love. Tomorrow she would send a note and ask him to come back.

The quiet was broken by running hoofs and a horseman shot through the gates straight toward the house. There was a familiar quality about the tilt of his head and the lines of his wide shoulders. And

as he swung down. Jeanie remembered a stranger taking her into his arms. Almost automatically she started for the door.

When she reached the lower hall, her father was talking to Steve Wayne, saying: "I'll leave right away. He's at the hotel?"

"Yes, sir. He hoped you'd come."

Bob Marlowe noticed the girl then, and his heavy, gray brows lowered. "I thought you'd gone to bed. I may not be back until late." His glance swept to Steve Wayne. "You coming with me?"

"I'd like to rest my pony."

"See you later, then." Marlowe hurried out.

"This must be something important," Jeanie murmured.

"It is. Maybe the most important thing in the state just now."

Her glance touched the guns at his thighs and she remembered the armed guards riding beside the middle-aged man in the buckboard. Her father had said: "Just good gunnies."

"Hadn't we better sit down?" she murmured and turned into the ranch-house living room.

He took a chair opposite her and the lamplight struck across his face; sharpened the straight line of his shoulders. His eyes were hazel and a lock of short, straight hair kept obstinately dropping down onto his forehead. "I offered to come back when—it was decided someone would have to come. I wanted to say I'm sorry about—tonight. I didn't mean to grab at you, like that."

Jeanie hesitated. Yes, he was just as he had seemed in the moonlight; tall and wirily graceful. A sensitive mouth, good eyes and chin. But there was no tug at her senses now, no crazy feeling that this stranger had come very close to her life. Instead, she was thinking of Cal and the bleakness in his gaze as he had turned away from her.

"You needn't be sorry," she told him quietly. "It was that kind of a night—maybe."

"Maybe," he agreed. Something moved in the depths of his eyes. "Still, I—" He broke off, and his faced closed with listening. "Thought I heard someone yell."

She heard it then, too—a man's shout coming from the trail. They started for the door together, but Steve Wayne reached it first. He said: "Wait here, I'll see what's happening."

TWO waddies were running from the bunkshed as she followed Wayne across the yard and the foreman was lifting someone from the saddle of a pony which had come to a halt just inside the gates.

"What is it—?" Her voice lifted and broke as she saw that the man in the foreman's arms was her father. The front of his shirt shone damply in the moonlight and his face was gray.

She stumbled forward, but the foreman snapped, "We'll have to get him to the house. Someone start for town and bring back the doctor."

Steve Wayne was helping him with the unconscious rancher now, supporting his head and shoulders while the foreman lifted his feet. They moved past her and a waddie started for the corrals at a run. She darted ahead to the house, where she raced upstairs to prepare her father's bed.

They put him down very carefully and the foreman said: "I'll undress him, ma'am."

As they went out Steve Wayne slipped his hand under her arm. A strong hand and the warmth in it drove away some of the chill shock.

She asked: "What—happened?"

"I don't know." His voice was thin. "But I'll find out."

"Who'd shoot him? There's no reason—"

"Hold on," he said, "You won't help by going out of control." His hand tightened on her arm and he led her downstairs, into the living room. "Try to take it easy," he said, putting her into a chair. "Your father must have some liquor around. You need it."

"It'd be in his office, but I don't want any."

He left the room without answering and a moment later returned with a bottle and two glasses. "We *both* need it," he said, and handed her one of the glasses.

She sipped at the brandy gingerly. It burned her throat. "Maybe it's time for you to tell me something about tonight. Dad said the mysterious visitor was the Governor. And, as soon as my father went out, he was shot."

Steve Wayne's face closed and the far light in the depths of his eyes became very

steady against her gaze. "I didn't think he'd tell you. Still, it's probably all right. The rest of the story is simple enough, but the Governor didn't want it known that he was interested. Within the last few months a gang of outlaws has been operating in this part of the country—maybe the biggest gang in the history of the district.

"Some of their crimes have been kept quiet to avoid panic, but they've held up six banks and a dozen other places. Nothing seems to stop 'em. Every lawman in the country can be planted at the spot where they ought to appear next, but instead they strike far away. The political opposition is beginning to make the most of it—charging that the Governor is letting his state become a bandit's paradise, and so on."

"But why did he want to see Dad about it?"

"Because we figure some of the outlaws—maybe the head man—is in the neighborhood of the Rocking K. Your father knows everyone and he'd notice hombres who didn't seem to fit in."

"Oh—"

"That's probably why he was shot. One of the gang found out the Governor had come here or was tipped off and when he saw your father starting out for town, figured he might have remembered something he hadn't told the Governor during his visit. So they stopped him."

Jeanie was silent, her gray eyes too wide and dark. "That would mean they followed the Governor to the ranch and then waited for my father."

"Or maybe one of 'em just stayed around to see what would happen. We seem to be getting close to them—at last."

The girl's soft mouth set. "Maybe at the cost of my father's life—" Her words broke off.

The foreman came to the door and said: "I've got him into bed, ma'am. You'd better go to him. I didn't try to do anything about his wound. A bullet straight through the chest, looks like."

Jeanie shot off the couch and out of the room. Upstairs, she walked noiselessly to her father's bedside and looked down at his gray, unconscious face. It was shadowed, as if—

She stopped the frightening thought and filling a basin with water, bathed the wound, finally binding it with the clean strips of sheeting.

There was nothing to do then except wait and she sat beside his bed listening tautly for the first sound which would announce the arrival of the doctor. It seemed hours later when the physician entered, saying at once: "I'll call you if I need you, Jeanie."

"Dr. Harrison—"

"We'll talk later."

She went out and after a tense moment before the closed door, moved down the stairs. In the hall she paused again and then started into the living room.

Steve Wayne was not there.

Instead, Cal Vincent came hurriedly toward her. "Jeanie, are you all right? I got here about half an hour ago—heard your father had been shot. One of the boys who'd been in town brought the news. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so. I don't know."

"Poor honey." His arm slid around her.

She clung to him. This was what she needed now—Cal's arms. The rest didn't matter.

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He led her to the couch and, still holding her, sat down. "Try not to think about it for a few minutes. I saw the doctor go up and maybe he'll tell you it's not as bad as it seems."

She did not speak, merely closed her eyes and pressed her face against his shoulder. His arms tightened gently and he kissed her cheek. But as she turned her lips, the touch of his hands became harder. He bent his head to find her mouth. All the shock of the past hour was pushed away from her. Her pulse stirred against the flesh, raced until fire swept through her. This was Cal, whom she loved.

His kiss broke off and he murmured: "It's all right with us, isn't it, sweet? You do love me, don't you?"

WITHOUT waiting for her reply, he claimed her mouth again and the fire moved across her lips. But abruptly the flame flickered down; dropped to the tiniest spark, for she was hearing a voice saying: *Sometimes men like to go down to the valley and play around, maybe get a little dusty.*

Was the dust of the valley on Cal, on his lips?

She moved out of his arms, and her head lifted as she looked into his face.

Cal asked: "What is it, darling?"

She got to her feet and turning away from him, saw Steve Wayne standing in the doorway. Was his mouth twisted or was she just imagining that? His glance moved to Cal.

Jeanie said faintly: "Steve, this is—Cal Summers."

Steve Wayne's eyelids shuttered together but before he could speak, Dr. Harrison called from the stairs.

Jeanie hurried out to him.

The doctor was silent until she followed him up to the second floor, where he paused and said: "Your father's wound is serious and he'll need constant attention. You're not to leave him for a minute. I'm going back to town but I'll return in an hour or so."

"I see." The words came through her dry lips. "Is he—do you think—?"

"I don't know. Bob's tough and I'm counting on him making it. If he becomes conscious don't let anyone talk to him—and don't talk to him yourself. Keep him quiet. I've written out some instructions for you. I'll wire your mother." He thrust a slip of paper into her hand, nodded briskly and went down the stairs.

Jeanie entered the bedroom and after studying her father's still face, once more sat down to wait. The minutes were leaden things, creeping slowly and finally she drowsed, sitting upright in her chair.

She wakened to hear her father speaking her name. She said, softly: "Don't try to talk. I can let you have a little water, if you want it."

"No," he said hoarsely. "I want to talk."

"The doctor said—"

"Damn the doctor. I've got something to tell and I'm going to tell it while I can. No knowing—"

She heard the faint, soft sound behind her but did not realize the door had opened until Cal Summers said:

"I was waiting in the hall to see if you'd need me and I heard him speaking. Maybe he can tell us something that'll help—to find out who shot him."

"No," she twisted around to face him. "He's not going to talk about it."

"Jeanie," the rancher murmured. "I know who—" His voice trailed off.

Cal moved closer to the bed.

The girl caught Cal's arm. "Didn't you hear me? The doctor's forbidden him to talk. He's too weak. Please leave now, Cal."

"In a minute." He was bending over, touching the wounded man's hands, as if to arouse him.

"Cal!"

"I'll get him out." A flat, level voice spoke from behind her and as Steve Wayne crossed the room, light glinted on the gun in his hand. He pushed the muzzle into Cal's back and said: "Outside, hombre."

Summers turned slowly, his eyes surprised. "What's the idea? I was just trying to get some information about the shooting."

"You were told he can't talk."

Cal moved impatiently. "Doctors always say that. It doesn't mean anything."

"It does this time. Outside." Steve Wayne was a fraction of an inch taller than Cal Summers and he made Jeanie think of metal too pliant to break.

Cal nodded stiffly. "Not many people tote guns in this country, but I'll be ready next time."

"Yeah," Steve Wayne murmured, and the gun prodded again.

Cal went out with long, stiff strides.

Jeanie hurried after them. "Wait," she said, and put out her hand to Cal Summers. "I know how you meant it, Cal, because I feel the same way. If I knew who'd done it, I'd start after them this minute."

His hand closed over hers and as he smiled the glints of gold in his eyes turned to tiny fires. When he released her she hurried back to the bed. Her father was unconscious. The night settled down again and she listened to the faint sounds from the yard. A pony moved slowly away from the corrals and boot heels clicked on hard ground.

But she straightened again as the door opened with slow noiselessness. "Didn't want to knock," Steve Wayne murmured. "I thought he might be sleeping." He closed the door carefully and going to the window, pulled aside the curtains. "It'd be easy to reach this room from the porch roof."

"But why should you think of that?"

"It just occurred to me." He came back to her. In the shaded lamplight his face looked very lean. "I think I'd better stay in this room. I'll sit near the window, out of your way."

Her gray eyes opened to wideness and her lips broke apart. "Do you think someone's going to climb in the window and—try to hurt Dad?"

"I'm not sure of what I think." He started toward a chair in the shadows, but turned back again. "Forget I'm here, ma'am. Probably nothing'll happen. I just want to be sure."

When she did not speak, he went to the chair. Jeanie returned to her place beside the bed. The silence descended but it was less oppressive and Jeanie's taut nerves relaxed. As her eyelids closed she was aware of a new sense of sureness as if she were completely, entirely safe. As if she were resting on a mountain top, well above the valley.

JEANIE awoke to discover she was still sitting in the chair at her father's bedside and that the room was gray with dawn. Someone was standing beside the bed and as the last drowsiness left her she recognized Dr. Harrison.

The doctor nodded at her. "About the same," he said quietly. "I didn't expect any change. Hope your mother gets back today."

"If you sent the wire, she'll be here," the girl said. "She's probably frantic. She didn't want to leave us, but you talked her into going to Denver."

"She needed the change," the physician said calmly. "Still, your father'll be better off when she's back."

"Doctor," the girl broke in ruefully, "I've been doing my best."

"Nothing to do with care, my dear. The fact that she's beside him is what'll help. Bob and Myra can do anything with each other."

"I know," Jeanie got up and stretched to ease her cramped muscles. "I just hope she isn't too upset—" Her words trailed off as she glanced toward the window, for Steve Wayne was still there, slumped down in a chair. He was asleep. Why, he looked like a boy.

"I don't know what it's about," Dr. Harrison said, "but that young man was standing at the window when I came in. He said: 'Morning, Doc,' and fell asleep immediately."

"He—was worried about Dad. Do you want me to stay here or can I get a bath and change of clothes?"

"Go ahead."

She hurried the bath and after putting on a frilled green morning dress, went down to the kitchen to make coffee. When it was ready, she placed the pot and three cups on a tray and carried it upstairs.

"Thanks," the doctor said, "I was thinking about coffee."

Steve Wayne sat up, at once completely awake and alert. "If that's a third cup, I'll use it."

"I thought you would." As she handed it to him, her fingers brushed his and they looked at each other quickly. It had been like this at their first meeting—that strange pull toward each other.

She turned back to the doctor. "Shall I

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try to give my Dad something to eat?"

"Not yet. It's better not to disturb him. And," his voice slowed, "we've a good many hours to go."

Something closed over Jeanie's heart. He meant it would be hours before he could be sure that her father would live. She put the coffee cups on the tray and left the room, almost at a run. This was a nightmare from which she would awaken at any second, for he couldn't be in danger of dying; such things didn't happen.

The front knocker was banging furiously. Calling: "Yes, just a minute!" she swung the door open, almost angrily.

A slight, middle-aged woman darted past her and made for the stairs.

"Mother! How'd you get here so soon?"

Mrs. Marlowe paused, halfway up the stairs. "I hired a special train," she said. "I certainly couldn't wait for the morning one. And I made Sheriff Colby drive me from town. How's your father?"

"There's been no change."

Myra Marlowe went on hurriedly and Jeanie's eyelids stung with sudden tears. Caring very deeply for another person could be a kind of torture. And she had just seen torture on her mother's face. But should that surprise her, after last night, when she had watched Cal drive away?

She also went upstairs to her room where she undressed and got into bed. The sun was rising as she fell asleep. When she awakened—it was setting. She put on riding clothes, brushed her hair until it caught the light. Then she crossed the hall to her father's door.

At her soft knock, Mrs. Marlowe appeared and said: "No, I don't want to rest. I'd rather stay with him."

Jeanie wandered down to the first floor, feeling dull from her daytime sleep. As she crossed the hall, Cal Summers came out of the living room. He said: "I've been waiting for hours. Your mother said you were sleeping." He took her hands and as he bent over her the golden points in his blue eyes caught fire. "Are you all right?" he demanded. "You look tired."

"Maybe I am—or probably I'm still not really awake. I think I'll go for a ride and get some air."

"Good. That'll give us a chance to be alone, too." He drew her into his arms.

"It's been days since we've been together —as we used to be, Jeanie."

HER pulse stirred swiftly, but the quick lift of her senses died almost at once and she was quiet in his arms. Her glance shot up to his face in something like fear. But he hadn't changed. His hair was still a short, bright plume.

"Yes," she said quickly and moved away from him. "I'll get my pony."

"No, I'll get it for you." He went down the steps.

When Cal returned he was in the saddle of his own mount and leading her pony. He lifted her up and, cantering out of the yard, they turned north, toward the hills. "Let's go to our special place," he said. His glance caught hers, held it captive for a full second.

Streaks of color burned across her cheeks, but she nodded and followed him onto the trail which branched from the main road up the side of Triangle Hill. Near the shoulder a ledge of granite jutted out like a platform and, leaving their ponies on the trail, they walked out to the edge. As they sat down with their feet dangling into space, Cal's arm went around her hungrily.

"You've seemed far away from me during the last few days," he said.

She said: I wonder *who* that is—cutting across range toward the Triple T."

Cal stiffened. She could feel him going taut. "Don't know. But he's carrying an iron, which means he's one of the gunnies who've shown up around here in the last couple of days."

"Gunnies?"

"Yeah. I've seen several of 'em, like that Wayne hombre who was at the Rocking K. They seem to be looking for someone."

She was silent, but her glance, going up to his face, caught the thinness of his mouth and the narrowness of his eyes. "Maybe they're hunting that gang of outlaws."

He turned his head sharply: "Outlaws—working around here? Who told you that —what'd they say?"

"Why, I think Dad told me. I'm not sure now. Just that there've been a number of crimes—bank holdups mostly."

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"Mmm. Did he say anything else? What's being done about it—or who's in charge of these gun-toters that've moved in?"

"No-o. After all, he wouldn't know much about it, either." She was silent then, staring down at the valley.

Cal's arms tightened. "Jeanie, you still seem to be holding me away from you."

"Do I?" Her gray eyes opened to wideness and her soft lips broke apart.

Instead of replying, he took her lips. The fire on his lips spread over hers, but only for the first, short second. Then the flame was gone.

She freed herself and got to her feet, turning so that he could not see her face. "I'll have to start back. Dad might get worse or Mother may need me."

"Jeanie."

But her glance had fixed upon a rider coming up the trail. He was tall and straight-shouldered, with a certain tilt to the carriage of his head. It was Steve Wayne who had said he would always prefer a mountain top to the valley.

He turned east at the forks and she remembered that the other rider whom Cal had called a gunnie had also headed toward the Triple T.

"Let's hurry," she said, and still without looking at Cal, started for the trail and her pony.

CHAPTER THREE

No Dusty Valleys . . .

AFTER supper that night, Jeanie insisted upon her mother resting and took her place at her father's side. The doctor, still noncommittal, had come and gone. Jeanie had been in the room only a few minutes when Bob Marlowe muttered:

"I couldn't figure it at the time—saw him with those hombres who looked like they were right off gun-smoke trail—saw 'em together in town and out on the range. He must've seen me, too, because he acted nervous about it later. He must be—" The words trailed off. When the girl bent over him, he had apparently lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Hoofbeats cut through the twilight still-

ness and she went to the window to look out at the yard. A strange rider was getting down before the house and Jeanie ran noiselessly from the room. If she hurried, her mother would not be disturbed by the sound of the knocker.

When she arrived, breathless, at the front door, the stranger said:

"Evening, ma'am. I brought a letter from the Governor to Mrs. Marlowe. We all hope your father's improving."

"Thank you. I'll give it to her."

"Know where I can find Steve Wayne?"

"Try the bunkshed."

The rider jerked at his hat and turned away. Carrying the envelope which bore the Governor's crest, Jeanie went back to her father.

Only a few minutes later there was a tap on the door. She answered and saw Steve Wayne.

"Could you come out a minute, ma'am? I want to say good-by."

Her gray eyes opened until they were too wide. And her heart missed a beat. Then it rushed on in great, hurting throbs. "Good-by?" she repeated, closing the door behind her.

"Yes, ma'am. The Governor's sent for me—got another job for me."

"Then you work for him—all the time?"

His glance flickered across her face thoughtfully. "Yeah. He's my uncle, ma'am. I try to help him when he needs someone he can be sure of."

"Oh. And now you're leaving?"

"Yeah."

Her eyes remained too wide and her face felt cold. "I'm sorry. I wish you could stay longer."

His eyes narrowed until they were lines of thick darkness, but his lips twisted. "And I wish I could believe that."

Her head lifted and once more she thought that her heart had missed a beat. "Why don't you, why can't you believe it?"

"It seemed to me, the other night, that something happened to us. Something intended to be. But I was wrong. It was just one of those things."

She did not speak, merely waited, with her eyes unable to leave his, with thin lines of hot color moving across her white cheeks.

He said: "It wasn't just grabbing at a

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pretty girl in the moonlight, for me, ma'am. And I thought it was important to you, too. But I saw you with Summers, afterwards—in his arms. I knew then—"

"I wish *I'd* known," she whispered when he broke off. "Do some people—do you—always know? You talked about mountain tops and dusty valley below. Maybe the valleys are for me."

"Stop that," he broke in, almost angrily. "They're not for you—not ever. But you can't help loving a man. And if Summers is the one you love, try to forget the valleys. Try not to think too much, and you can be happy."

"I don't want that kind of happiness."

"Look," he moved a little toward her, his hands covered hers. "If he's what you want, you can't help yourself. You'll have to try to understand, although you don't seem to have much understanding. He'll give you the best of himself, but he can't give you all of himself. I can see how those things are, but you can't. For instance—" his voice dropped even more and his hands tightened until their grip hurt—"this. . . . I know you belong to someone else and I've no right to you—" He released her hands, and caught her into his arms. "Adios, Jeanie." And then his mouth found hers.

She was back in the soft warmth of the first night they had met; once more knew that he had come very close to her and that the moments in the unbelievable moonlight had been the most real thing in her life.

"Steve," she said, the word a whispered sob, as he released her.

"Good-by." He hurried down the stairs.

IT WAS ten o'clock the next morning when Cal Summers arrived. Jeanie was working in the kitchen. Cal entered quietly, saying: "I didn't knock—just came in so I wouldn't bother your mother."

"Oh—" She almost jerked around. But at the sight of his face the rest of her words died. He appeared old, his face gaunt and the flesh under his eyes lined. "What is it? You look as if something dreadful—"

He paused a few feet away from her. "No. Not exactly." His eyes were without their glints of gold. "I'm going away for a few days—business for the boss. He

wants me to look at a bunch of cattle down near the state line."

"Nothing about that to make you look so grim. You ought to figure you're in luck —a vacation at the boss' expense."

"Yeah," his still, almost lifeless eyes met hers, "but it means leaving you." He caught her hands.

"But you'll be back in a little while—"

He stopped her words with his lips. She pulled away from him. For as his mouth touched hers she had thought of a cool, distant mountain peak and another man's arms. There was something in Cal's kiss —something humid and dusty . . . as valleys might be.

He straightened and stared at her. "So, it's like that," he said slowly. "Well, maybe that makes it easier." He nodded at her stiffly and walked out of the kitchen unhurriedly, almost deliberately. . . .

Jeanie found the darkness oppressive when she tried to sleep and, finally got up to light a small lamp on the bedside table. She drowsed after that and was dropping into real slumber when a wild, piercing scream tore through the house. Her mother! And the scream came from her father's room!

She leaped out of bed to race across the hall and, as her hand found the doorknob, a gun barked from the yard. It was answered from somewhere within the house.

She pushed violently at the door and saw her mother standing with her hands pressed against her face. Her father was sitting up in bed looking dazedly toward the window.

"Oh, Jeanie," Mrs. Marlowe sobbed, "a man was coming in the window. He must have climbed up the the roof of the porch. When I saw him he was getting ready to shoot your father, I ran at him, screaming. Someone shot him from the yard below. Then he dropped out of sight."

"From the yard," the girl repeated. "I wonder who—none of the waddies are armed."

"I don't know."

But Jeanie was already out in the hall. Darting into her own room, she caught up a robe and pushed her feet into slippers. As she started downstairs guns roared again, but the sound was farther away now, from somewhere near the gates.

When she reached the porch she saw a

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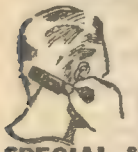

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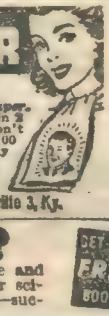

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man, sharply outlined by the moon, using one of the gateposts as cover while he fired at someone on the trail. She ran, then—ran with crazy speed over the rough ground. For she could not be mistaken about the man near the gates. There was only one person with that tilt to his head, that wiry ease to his movements.

"Steve!" His name tore from her throat.

He glanced back briefly, calling: "Don't come any closer."

She stopped and silence dropped over the whole world. Even the waddies, who had been hurrying for the gates, halted to wait. The minutes went on like great, slow breaths.

Finally Steve moved. His gun ready, he walked out onto the trail and crossing it, disappeared into the brush.

Jeanie closed her eyes. Shots might sound at any minute—bullets which would find his heart. But there was no roar of gunfire and the stillness deepened until slowly moving feet struck echoes from the earth.

She opened her eyes and saw Cal Summers coming toward her—and behind him, gun leveled, was Steve Wayne. Cal's face was streaked with crimson from a gash in his forehead and blood was seeping through his shirt just below his shoulder. His glance flicked toward her, but he did not pause or speak. When Steve passed, she turned to follow him.

Cal marched to the bunkshed. The waddies closed in around him.

"Tie him up," Steve said.

Two of the riders took Summers arms and propelled him inside. The others crowded after them.

Steve dropped his gun back into its holster. "I'm sorry, Jeanie. Especially sorry you had to watch it."

"Then he—Cal—tried to kill my father."

"Yeah. He's one of the gang we're hunting. I left early tonight, telling everyone I was going to another part of the country. And I went a good distance, too. When it was dark enough, I turned back. And I got here just as he reached the window. I put a bullet through his shoulder, but he still tried to make a fight."

She was silent.

Steve said: "I wish it hadn't happened to you. If you cared for him—"

"Steve," she spoke softly. "I thought I

did. But today, when he came to say he was leaving on a trip for his boss, I couldn't let him kiss me—because of you."

He moved toward her until he was very close and his gaze probed her eyes. "Do you mean it?" he demanded. "Unless you do—"

"I never meant anything quite so much."

Still he searched her face almost unbelievingly.

She lifted her arms, opened them to him. "You were right. We were intended to be together—and on the hilltop . . . not in the valley."

His arms took her almost fiercely. "There aren't any valleys in the world," he said. "Not in our world."

THE END

PONY EXPRESS

(Continued from page 73)

collectors. I have a fine book collection and would enjoy discussing books with them. I am greatly interested in books on ancient history of Rome, Egypt and archaelogical expeditions, especially in "The Valley of the Kings".

A brief description of myself: I am 35 years old, 5 ft. 2 in. tall, rather stout, a former Chicagoan, but perfectly satisfied with country life.

Anyone is welcome to write, but especially welcome are the "big girls" from 180 lbs. to ——? who would be interested in joining Round Robin letter clubs composed only of "us big gals."

I have one such club in operation composed of 14 members and it's a "huge" success in more ways than one. Let me hear from you.

MISS B. WILSON
R. #1
Whitehall, Mich.

Green Eyes

Dear Editor:

Have you another place on your pen pal page you could rent to a Westerner? I am a rather tall girl of 5 ft. 11 in., with dark-blonde hair and green eyes. I'm third tallest in our little school—being beat only by two Senior boys! Shucks! I'm just a Junior and am sixteen years old. Boy, how I wish I were eighteen. They say they need more WAVES.

Well, how's about it, Mr. Editor? Come on guys and gals—give a real Westerner a chance.

LORAN DEE HALLMARK
Box 322
Cover, Oregon

Government Girl

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you have room in the Pony Express column for me? I have read RANGELAND ROMANCES for nearly a year since I came to Ottawa and really enjoy it.

I am a lonely government girl who likes writing letters. I'm 17 years old, have auburn hair, hazel eyes and am 5 ft. 4 in. tall, weigh 115 lbs. I'd love to hear from all you boys and girls all

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ANGELA ZACHARIAO
510 Gilmour St.
Ottawa, Ont., Canada

Sweet Sixteen

Dear Editor:

Please help me by publishing my letter to the Pony Express. I've been reading RANGELAND ROMANCES for a long time now, and I would like to meet some of your readers.

Calling lads and lassies who like cowboy music, for that's right up my alley. Come on and be a true-blue pen pal. I will do my best to answer all letters. I am sweet sixteen, but not too sweet, from and raised in Honolulu, but still raring for the open spaces. So sling some ink my way and help me corral my blues.

MISS MARIE DOLORES GVILLA
3431 Edna St.
Honolulu 40, T. H.

Brown-Eyed Blonde

Dear Editor:

Could you spare a little space on your Pony Express page for me? I am a lonely farm girl in search of some friends, and I know this is how I can find 'em. I hope!

I am 16 years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, and weigh 129 lbs. I am a fair-complexioned, brown-eyed blonde. I love all outdoor sports, such as baseball, hiking, camping, and especially horseback riding. As for indoors, I like to bake cookies, read and write letters. I play the accordion, piano, guitar and try to sing and yodel. I am very fond of music.

So, come on, you cowboys and cowgirls, drop me a few lines—won't you? But everybody else is invited to write. I will send a snapshot of myself to the first five who write. So won't someone write to me? Please.

MISS STELLA HERMAN
R. R. 2
Ellis, Kansas

Golden Sherry

Dear Editor:

Will you *please* do something about my mailbox? I have managed to take on quite a few war duties, but there's one other that I might help with, and I'd sure love to try—namely, to make sure that a lot of the boys and girls in the service, both in the United States and overseas, find that "letter from home," when they have mail call.

I'm 5 ft. 3½", have golden blonde hair and brown eyes, and am interested in everything and everyone. There now, fire when ready—I'll do my "derndest" to cheer you when you feel low or match wits with you when all's well. G'bye now. . . .

SHAROW "Sherry" BLAINE
Box 123
Portland 3, Me.

Find Out For Yourself

Dear Editor:

Here are a few words from a faithful reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES. I am a blonde, brown-eyed, typical Canadian, teen-aged girl. I would like very much to hear from servicemen, and I promise to answer all the mail. People say I am pretty, but you must find out for yourself. Answer my plea for letters, and I shall send you a picture.

I have five brothers, all younger than I, and my father works as a machinist in a rubber plant. I can tell you many interesting things about it, as I work there too. My brother, Charles, works at a basket factory. Hoping to have this letter printed in RANGELAND ROMANCES, and also having many pen pals, I remain,

L. CAROL ASKIN
RR 1
Oakville, Ontario, Canad

SeaBee's Wife

Dear Editor:

I am the SeaBee's wife who had a letter printed in your July issue of RANGELAND ROMANCES, and I wish to thank you and also the many people who wrote to me.

I received over one hundred letters, and I am sorry that I couldn't write to all of you. And so I say good-by and may God bless all of you, especially those of you who are serving our country so bravely.

MRS. MARION F. DRUMM
Route 1
Leslie, Mich.

Texas Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

RANGELAND ROMANCES is my favorite magazine and the Pony Express is my favorite pen pal column. I would greatly appreciate it if you would enter my request for pen pals.

I'm a cowgirl and I hail from Texas. I've spent the most of my sixteen years in the saddle and can ride like the wind. I've never been thrown by a horse yet. I enjoy riding horseback better than anything else. It's fun to sit my horse and watch the cattle grazing out on the mesa. It's fun, too, to go out behind the barn where no one will see, and ride that strange horse that was just shipped in.

I also like fishing, hunting, trapping, roping and riding steers; and running races and entering the bucking contests. My hobbies are writing letters, collecting cowboy songs, postcards and photos.

I have dark brown hair and eyes, and somewhat dark features (from the Texas sun). I'm 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh 115.

I want to hear from anyone and everyone. There is no regard as to age, life, state or country. I would like to hear from those on the range, the city, the Armed Forces, and those in other countries. If anyone has the same last name as I, please drop me a line.

So come on, pen pals, if you want to make yourself a friend and pal.

"TEX" BULLIN
Star Route
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EMPIRE DIAMOND CO.
Dept. ST-331, Jefferson, Iowa

Welcome, Rita

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your magazine for several years and I think it's swell! This is my first letter to the Pony Express so I hope I won't be disappointed.

I'm 20 years old, five ft. 5 in. tall, weigh 105 lbs. and have blonde (natural) hair and brown eyes. I like all outdoor and indoor sports, but most of all I like to ride horseback. I have but few friends and they are in South America. So come on, boys and girls.

MISS RITA CURTEZ
1531 Kohn Ave. (Apt. 13)
Chicago 23, Ill.

Army Wife

Dear Editor:

Hope I can crash the gates again! I did once in June and I thank all of the ones that wrote. Sorry I couldn't answer them all.

The first of the year I'm moving to Portland, Oregon and I want to make new friends in Oregon and Washington. I'm an Army wife with a hubby in the Aleutian Islands. I'm 18, have brown hair and brown eyes, 5 ft. 2 in. and weigh 120 lbs. Also have a little brown-eyed daughter a year and a half old who's my pride and joy. So come on, folks, and drop me a line.

(MRS.) MARGUERITE CAPELLE
1095 5th St. (Apt. 2)
San Bernardino, Calif.

Real Hillbilly

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you could find room in your Pony Express for a letter from a real hillbilly? I've lived up here in the pines for six years and though I love it, I do get lonely at times. My hobby is writing stories, although I never publish them. I have brown hair and eyes, am tall and I weigh 134 lbs. I was sixteen last June and I'm a Junior in High School. I live at a small sawmill which is run by my dad and brother, fourteen miles from Young. So come on, everyone, write to me.

BETTY JO CUNNINGHAM
Young
Arizona

Trick-Ropin' Flo

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANGELAND ROMANCES for some time and it rates tops with me. This is my first try at the Pony Express and I would like very much to get some pen pals.

I live on a farm, have two saddle horses of my own. I'm seventeen years old, have brown hair, hazel eyes. I'm 5 ft. 4½ in. tall and weigh 120 lbs. I like sports of the outdoor type and my favorites are horseback riding, trick roping and hiking. When I have nothing I write stories, songs, sing or draw. I play a number of musical instruments and do some yodeling, too.

I'd be glad to hear from everyone everywhere and will promise to answer every letter, as I know how it is to get no answers.

FLO LONGWORTH
Box 344
Chelsea, Michigan

Constant Reader

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I've tried to get my name in the Pony Express, so let's see if I succeed. I am a young man 27 years old, with black hair and blue eyes. I'm 5 ft. 7 in. tall, and weigh about 125 lbs.

I am a constant reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES and like to read, write letters and sing. I will write to all or anyone, and would love to hear especially from those in the service. I am a cripple and cannot get into the service myself.

So come on all you pals and write me, and don't forget you boys and girls in the service, I would like to hear from you, too. So why not try me out and fill my mailbox? I promise to answer all letters.

GEORGE SISSON
Box 47, R.R. #2
Pliny, W. Va.

No Folks. . . .

Dear Editor:

I have just moved into a strange state and a strange city so I know very few people here. I'm not so young anymore, so it's not so easy to adapt myself to strange surroundings as it used to be.

I am 44 years old, 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh about 130 lbs. I hope my age won't keep my letter out of print because I certainly get lonesome. I'll be glad to hear from anyone, but will especially enjoy the ones from those around my own age or from servicemen who have no folks to write to them. Give me a break, will you?

(MRS.) ETHEL SAWLSVILLE
15 Horton Street
Battle Creek, Mich.

Golden Poppy

Dear Editor:

I hail from sunny California, the state where the golden poppies grow. I enjoy reading RANGELAND ROMANCES very much. I am a teen-age girl with black hair and black eyes and a fair complexion. I play the guitar, the piano and several other musical instruments. I enjoy reading and collecting postcards. But I like to write and receive letters best of all. I would like to hear from anyone of any age. So come on, pen pals, sling some ink down Long Beach way.

JOY BENNETT
905 Rose Avenue
Long Beach 4, Calif.

Wants A Shower. . . .

Dear Editor:

Please put my name in your pen pal department for a postcard shower and letters from all the pretty widows and spinsters who will write me. I've written three letters and they all went to the waste-basket.

STEVEN SIMPKINS
42 Elwood St.
Tiffin, Ohio

Servicemen!

Dear Editor:

Please print this plea for pen pals in your next issue of RANGELAND ROMANCES. I shall

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be very glad if you do for I am a lonely girl from New Mexico. I am 15 years of age, 5 ft. 1 in. tall, weighing 92 pounds, and I have black hair and dark-brown eyes. I will try to answer all of your letters and I would like to hear mostly from servicemen as I have three brothers of my own in the service. I love to write letters and I can tell you lots about New Mexico.

ANN NAKAYAMA
Route 1
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Please Be Patient. . . .

Dear Editor:

My plea for pen pals was published in the August issue of RANGELAND ROMANCES. Since then, I've received 978 letters and they are steadily coming in.

I am answering all letters as soon as possible, so, pen pals, don't feel disappointed if you haven't received an answer. I am answering those with snaps, cards or souvenirs first.

I received letters from every state, Mexico, Hawaii, the Aleutian Islands and some of the South Pacific Islands—letters from boys in hospitals recovering from wounds received in battle.

Some of my most prized letters were from:

1) an ex-Navy man who was recovering from burns received from swimming in burning oil after his ship was torpedoed;
2) a mud-spattered letter from a soldier in the Aleutian islands—a soldier that was dying and writing only to keep his mind off his pain;

Two beautiful friendships I have formed were with: Carl Daugherty from Mexico, and Private Jerome Morris from Texas.

I want to thank all the pen pals for their letters and ask them to please be patient.

(MISS) PAT OSTMAN
Route 1—Box 77
Gilbert, Minn.

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Calling Barbara!

Dear Editor:

My letter goes direct to a girl named Barbara Barr, a constant reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES. Will she please write to me, because I'm eating my heart out with lonesomeness and worry, just to hear from her.

Clara was planning on taking you to Washington, Barbara, where you could be with her. We are all very anxious to hear how you are getting along, so please write to your Mother. I would be glad to hear from anyone knowing Barbara Barr's address.

MAUDE I. BARR
R. F. D. #4
Watertown, New York

Hi, Penny!

Dear Editor:

Please print this, because if you don't, I shall follow the quotation of John Paul Jones, "I have not yet begun to fight." I am determined to get just loads of pen pals, so I'll keep right on trying.

I am 15 years old, am 5 ft. 3 in. tall and weigh 117. I have dark-brown, naturally curly hair. My eyes are a deep brown, with long black curly eyelashes. I like all outdoor and indoor sports, and love to dance.

Would enjoy to hear from servicemen, civilians and even grandmoms.

MABEL (PENNY) PERRY
1422 E. San Fernando
San Jose 12, California

Old-Timer

Dear Editor:

Could you spare space in your Pony Express department for an old-timer? I received very good results from my last appeal, some few years back, but have decided to secure some new pen pals. Here's my plea. I volunteered for Civil Service at Pearl Harbor about two weeks after the little rat Japs attacked. But here I find myself, after three years, down in the Panama Canal Zone! I am a stamp collector, but will answer all letters and cards. I cannot give you any information about the Canal as the censor would only cut it out. I can tell you, though, about the people and the wild life and will gladly send card views of this part of the world.

JAMES A. DONLON
P. O. Box 1618
Balboa, C. Z.

Clarinet Pat

Dear Editor:

How about entering a plea for a Michigan gal? I live up north and love to receive mail. The only flaw is that I don't receive enough of it. I am a girl 15, 5 ft. 2½ in. tall, have soft brown wavy hair, big blue eyes and weigh 120 lbs. I am in my second year of high and play clarinet in the band.

So how about all you girls, boys, servicemen and women writing? All are very welcome.

PAT OHMEN
804 Houghtling St.
Iron Mountain, Mich.

Adios, amigos, till next month.

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(Continued from page 50)

McCoy began to grin. She did not bother to check up on the results of his shooting. When the gun fell from his hand she ran to him. . . .

Meanwhile the sheriff knocked Chatty Johnson flat. Chatty Johnson liked to talk. He talked loud enough so Elaine could hear him after she had placed McCoy back in his bed and knelt there beside him holding his hand. Mark heard, too.

"Phoebe has that poker," Elaine explained to Mark. "She could not hurt a bug, but Chatty Johnson does not know that."

"He didn't rob your old man's lousy bank," Chatty said. "It was my idea. We was at his house the night your old man took the place away from him. He'd hired us to help break horses a couple days before that. He didn't know we was just casing the county. So I thought up the idea of busting the bank when Brackett took his place. Everybody blame it on Mack. Damn smart idea. Trouble is Mack caught up with us when we was set to rob that train. We took him in to get another feller to blame. Smart idea, too. But Slim Willie killed that express guard and Mack run off with the loot. He—"

There was more to it, with embellishments, from the man who would always talk when he had a chance. It was the story that Mark McCoy had known nobody would believe. And after a while Phoebe showed up in the doorway while the sheriff cleaned up the kitchen.

"Pop'll do anything I tell him to," Phoebe said, "except not foreclose on a mortgage. He'll cuss and swear, but I'll make him swap that McCoy place plus a full talley of beef for this old mill just as soon as Mark clears himself. Okay?"

"It sure is," Elaine cried.

She turned to Mark McCoy.

"It sure is," he whispered—and kissed her just behind the ear.

Laughing, Elaine glanced back up at Phoebe. Just behind Phoebe the sheriff's face was visible. The sheriff's eyes were marked with wonder, but the jealousy was gone. Elaine reckoned the sheriff and Phoebe would make out okay, and she turned back to her own man.

THE END

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